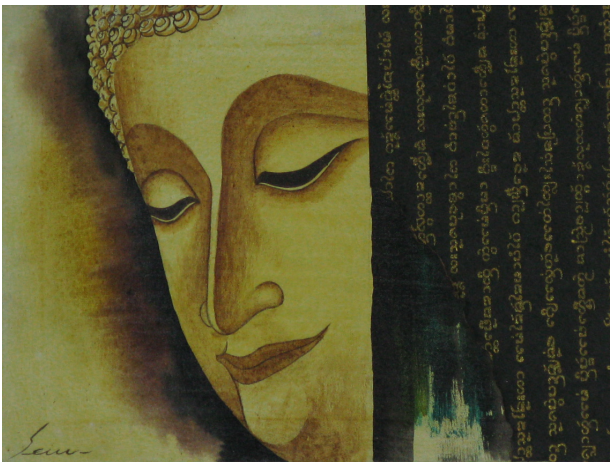
Unveiling Tathāgatagarbha:

An Exposition



Master Shi Shengru

Translated by

Shugyo T. G. P.

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Cover image:
An unknown Burmese artist,
whose original artwork
has accompanied me for over two decades.

To my root teacher, Fu Schroeder,

and to all beloved Dharma teachers, Dharma siblings,

and Dharma friends with whom

I've been blessed to practice with in various Zen sanghas.

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Master Shi Shengru (釋生如法師)

Bhikṣuṇī Shi Shengru was born in 1967 in Shenyang City, Liaoning Province, China. She graduated in July 1989 from a university specializing in Finance and Economics. Her practice journey began in 2000, and in November 2003, she was ordained as a Bhikṣuṇī. In 2005, she received the triple-platform ordination at Puti Temple in Hubei Province.

From 2004 to 2012, She spent eight years in solitary retreat, immersing herself in the study of the *Āgama Sutras*, the six hundred volumes of the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutras*, and numerous other sutras and śāstra, including Zen classics. Through her deep practice of Samādhi and insight contemplation (Vipaśyanā), she realized the four noble truths, Zen's Gates and Prajñā wisdom.

Between 2012 and 2013, she began teaching Dharma to lay practitioners in Liaoning and Shandong provinces. During this time, she directly experienced the manifestation of various contemplative wisdom and gradually gained a thorough understanding of both Mahayana and Hinayana teachings, leading to the arising of profound "consciousness-only" (vijñānamātra) wisdom.

By the end of 2014, she began teaching Dharma online, focusing on the liberation path of the *four noble truths*, *Prajñāpāramitā and Mahāvaipulya Sutra*s, and Zen teachings. At the beginning of 2015, she shifted her focus to Yogācāra teachings.

Today, her teaching primarily centers on Tathāgatagarbha-Yogācāra, with Prajñāpāramitā and Āgamas as complementary teachings. She guides her disciples in deep meditation, insight contemplation and the study of Buddhadharma, encouraging diligent practice of the path to realization through direct perceiving. She also encourages her disciples to immerse themselves deeply in Yogācāra scriptures and sutras to aid in propagating the Buddha's authentic teachings. Most of her teachings have been compiled

into both paperbacks and e-books, freely available at: https://www.shishengru.com.

Introduction

The Tathāgatagarbha is the source of all dharmas, encompassing the origin and culmination of phenomena across both mundane and supramundane realms. It resembles the wish-fulfilling jewel, *Cintāmani*, unknown to sentient beings in the ordinary world. Containing the seeds of all dharmas, it aligns effortlessly with karmic affinities and responds to all aspects of existence.

This compilation of Dharma lectures on the Tathāgatagarbha presents varied perspectives on its functionings and characteristics, unveiling its true nature. It offers practitioners a profound understanding that both mundane and supramundane worlds are inseparable within the True Dharma Realm—where all is Thusness, without duality or separation.

Unveiling Tathāgatagarbha《細說如來藏》offers one of the most detailed expositions linking the Tathāgatagarbha with scientific analysis. It illuminates how the Tathāgatagarbha generates, sustains and supports all phenomena, using the five skandhas and eighteen realms as tangible examples. This approach affirms the Tathāgatagarbha as the true source of all dharmas, effectively countering the Annihilationist Doctrine of the Tīrthikas.

The final section introduces a method for realizing the Tathāgatagarbha, distinguishing it from the sixth and seventh consciousnesses, as well as from the true and false minds. When practiced correctly, this method enables practitioners to verify and directly realize their Tathāgatagarbha, preventing the misidentification of the sixth and seventh consciousnesses' functions as awakening. Realizing the Tathāgatagarbha strengthens concentration, gradually allowing practitioners to observe its workings within the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena. This process cultivates wisdom that frees the mind and culminates in the realization of no-self and the virtuous merit of liberation.

Nothing is more important than verifying and realizing the Tathāgatagarbha. It is my sincere hope that this book serves as a guide for both lay and monastic practitioners, inspiring diligent practice, allowing innate great wisdom to emerge, and ultimately leading to Buddhahood.

Master Shengru（釋生如法師）

Acknowledgment of Translation Work

I would like to acknowledge that I have not been able to obtain permission from Master Shengru for this translation work. On her website, there is a contact form, hidden within the book-ordering page. However, despite my attempts to reach her, I have not received a response to my inquiry, and further searches for alternative contact methods have yielded no results.

Although her website provides links to social media accounts, they exist within China's unique internet ecosystem. Due to government censorship, foreigners are unable to register on these platforms without a cellphone number tied to a Chinese carrier, making that avenue inaccessible to me.

Despite these challenges, I chose to begin the translation. Master Shengru has vowed that anyone benefiting from her teachings will come under their influence. They will follow in her footsteps, tirelessly practicing the Bodhisattva Path to save every savable sentient being across countless kalpa. Even after attaining Buddhahood, they will continue the Buddha's work, aiding sentient beings until the last one attains Buddhahood, just as she serves the Buddha and repays his great compassion by coming to our world. She emphasized that no one touched by her teachings can escape the power of this vow, which she declared to be even stronger than Māra's influence.

I learned of her vow only after making my own to translate the book. It was too late—the power of her vow, as she had declared, would not allow me to turn back. Guṇabhadra (394–468), a renowned translator and Indian monk known for translating the *Lankāvatāra Sutra* and *The Lion's Roar of Queen Śrīmālā Sutra*, is noted in the *Memoirs of Liang Dynasty Eminent Monks* 《梁高僧傳》, to have known little or no Chinese. Yet, he sought to spread the Buddhadharma to ancient China during the Northern and Southern Dynasties era. A devoted follower of Avalokiteśvara, he prayed to her for

help. One night, a figure dressed in white appeared in his dream, carrying a head. Guṇabhadra expressed his concerns, and the figure severed his head, replacing it with the one they held. From the following day onward, Guṇabhadra began to understand Chinese fluently.

I am timid. Carrying a karmically-laden body with limited virtuous merits throughout my life, and with each mental construction of body, speech and mind, new unwholesome karmic seeds are often generated, and seeds that were previously generated are sometimes watered. I dared not pray for a new head. Instead, for nearly two months during an Ango at Zenshinji, I prayed daily to Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva, Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva and Samantabhadra Bodhisattva to bestow their great compassion, wisdom, and vows of practice upon me, so that I might gain enough wisdom, language skills and discernment to fulfill my vow. Finally, I prayed to Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva to remove my karmic obstacles, allowing me to undertake the translation without hindrance.

Did the four great Bodhisattvas answer my prayers? Can this book stand as a testament to their vows, guiding this very sentient being to ensure I do not fail in fulfilling theirs?

Believing that the teachings of the Tathāgatagarbha can guide sincere practitioners to the other shore, waiting for official permission felt like a mere illusion arising from my deluded mind. Nonetheless, I hope that after completing the translation of all four books in this series, I will find a way to present it to her. Perhaps someone who benefits from this translation will eventually bring it to her attention.

This book is a compilation of Master Shengru's Dharma lectures on the Tathāgatagarbha. It retains a raw and precious quality, appearing not to have undergone formal editorial processing or thorough proofreading. Similarly, my translation—drawn directly from her website rather than the paperback version available there—has not been edited beyond the invaluable assistance of an AI Bodhisattva, which helped correct grammatical errors and refine the text's flow. This volume is the first in a series of four, and I sincerely hope that my translation does justice to Master Shengru's teachings,

faithfully conveying them in English. Any mistakes or discrepancies are entirely my own.

In sutra translation, five established principles guide the choice of non-translation. I have adhered to one of these principles by preserving certain key Sanskrit terms and providing their English translations as helpful references. For example, the term "kṣaṇa" (imperceptible instant) was introduced into Chinese early on, when Buddhism first arrived in ancient China. In the *Sutra of the Benevolent King's Perfection of Wisdom* 《仁王護國般若波羅蜜經》, translated by Amoghavajra, the Buddha explains that a single thought contains 90 kṣaṇa, and each kṣaṇa involves 900 arising and ceasing. Retaining this term in English, particularly when discussing karmic seeds, the Tathāgatagarbha's inherent great seeds and mental formations, offers English-speaking practitioners a more nuanced understanding as they observe their mind. Additionally, I have opted not to italicize non-English words and have included explanatory comments and notes within the chapters where appropriate.

During his extensive online teachings on *Emptiness and the Mind Perceiving It*, broadcast over YouTube and offered by Sravasti Abbey, Jay Garfield was asked which sutra a particular insight originated from. He responded that the insight had come from paying careful attention to the grammar of the teachings. This resonated deeply with me in my own study of sutras and Zen scriptures. While translating this book, the AI Bodhisattva and I engaged in hours of linguistic-dharma combat, and I often found myself questioning its decisions—particularly when those decisions altered the meaning of the teachings in both significant and subtle ways. It took quite a while for the system to align more closely with my choice of words, sentence constructions, and my intent to present this teaching in English as accurately and faithfully as possible. However, with each system upgrade, its artificial karmic propensities would resurface, along with new habits, presenting fresh challenges in maintaining consistency.

With that said, I encourage readers to pay close attention to my choice of words with an inquisitive mind. Approach them with great doubt, challenge them, and be humbled by them. Take the time to

reflect on simple sentences, which one might otherwise read through quickly without a second thought.

It is customary in Chinese Buddhism for sutras and Dharma books to be freely available—a tradition dating back to ancient times. The cost of these books has traditionally been covered by donations from lay practitioners, such as court officials, government figures, or local dignitaries in ancient China, who provided offerings as part of their dāna practice. Dharma belongs to all and is meant to benefit anyone who seeks it. In this spirit, Master Shengru's books have been made freely available, and I will also be following her steps to make the translation accessible to anyone. I have no intention of seeking donations to mass-produce a paperback edition; instead, a digital format will be available for people to download. However, if any monastery finds these teachings valuable and wishes to create paperback copies for their sangha, bookstore, or library, they are welcome to do so. They may charge whatever is necessary to cover printing and overhead costs, without needing my permission. If you'd like to request a print-ready copy, please reach out to "my lotus sutra" at gmail dot com.

Lastly, I want to express my deepest gratitude to Leslie James, the abiding senior Dharma teacher at Zenshinji. In the absence of my root teacher, she has been guiding my practice in the way my heart has most needed. Before I made my vow to translate this book, I shared with her my thoughts about starting to write—and this time, in English—or translating teachings I believed would benefit Western practitioners. She said, "Do it."

Translator's Note:
Dropping Seven and the Eight

Yunmen asked, "An ancient Buddha and the open pillars intersecting—which pivot is this?" While translating this book, something illuminated: three seemingly unrelated notions from my childhood through early adulthood threaded together without my awareness and guided me on my path to Zen practice. As a child, I was drawn to martial arts fiction. Most of those stories faded over time, but one sticks: I became obsessed with understanding the underlying mechanisms behind everything I learned, believing that only by deeply comprehending how things worked could I truly excel. In martial arts lingo, this quest resembles the legendary secret treasure—the ultimate kungfu sought by all martial arts practitioners. The most famous of these is "The Transcendental Palm of the Tathāgata," a fictional martial art said to be transmitted by the Tathāgata. It is so powerful that it can save suffering beings, ease their pain, rival natural disasters, vanquish demons and overcome all obstacles. I fancied finding such kungfu to conquer my own suffering and remove my pains.

At some point in my early adulthood, I came across the expression míngxīn jiànxìng (明心見性)—illuminating one's mind and seeing one's nature. Although I understood the words, their true meaning eluded me. Years later, long before I encountered Zen practice, a teaching took root in me: "If you don't recognize your original mind, studying the Buddha way is not beneficial," Hongren told Huineng. Could this be the same "mind" as in míngxīn jiànxìng? I had no one to ask.

In *Journey to the West*, despite the Monkey King's transcendental power—able to leap 108,000 *li* in a single somersault—no matter how many continuous somersaults he performed, he could never escape the palm of the Tathāgata. I was obsessed with this fact, wondering if the secret lay in the Transcendental Palm of the Tathāgata.

As I grew older and faced the struggles of life, I began to equate my circumstances with karma, believing that my existence was the result of bad karma accumulated over previous lives—bitterly inescapable.

In a serendipitous turn, I encountered Zen practice. As Zen ancestors would say, "causes and conditions, times and seasons." It didn't take long for me to realize that this practice was the only treasure I truly needed. My view of bad karma began to shift. Perhaps I hadn't been doing everything wrong in my past lives after all.

One day, during a dokusan with the now-retired Abbess, she suddenly said, "I really believe in Buddha-nature." Her face was serious, her voice firm, and her eyes kind. Plop! Something dropped in my mind. What was she telling me? It was the first time I'd heard "Buddha-nature" spoken aloud by a real person—my root teacher.

From *The Record of Finger Pointing to the Moon*《指月錄》, a Zen scripture: Poluoti (Sanskrit transliteration to Chinese), said to have also studied under Bodhidharma, was asked by the King, "What is Buddha?" He responded, "Seeing Buddha-nature is Buddha." The King asked, "Do you see Buddha-nature?" Poluoti replied, "I see Buddha-nature." The King pressed further, "Where is Buddha-nature?" Poluoti answered, "Its functioning is active right now. That's why you can't see it." The King asked, "Do I have Buddha-nature?" Poluoti replied, "If it's functioning in you, it pervades everywhere. If it's not, you won't see its essence." The King then asked, "Where does it pervade?" Poluoti replied, "In eight places: in the womb as body, in conduct as being, in the eyes as seeing, in the ears as hearing, in the nose as smelling, in the tongue as speech, in the hands as clinging, and in the feet as running. It pervades infinite sandy worlds and, in concentration, dwells within a speck of dust. Those who know it call it Buddha-nature; those who don't call it spirit."

This teaching was the most revealing mitsugo—the secret language—on Buddha-nature I had ever encountered. My obsession shifted: How do I experience my Buddha-nature when it pervades everywhere?

I encountered Master Shengru's teachings while seeking modern insights into Yogācāra and Tathāgatagarbha. Her work, especially

Unveiling Tathāgatagarbha, connected the dots across the different schools of thought I'd encountered but had struggled to unify into a single brushstroke of an enso circle: the secret behind the Transcendental Palm of the Tathāgata, why the Monkey King couldn't escape from it, the true meaning of míngxīn jiànxìng, my karma, my place in this samsaric world, and how to practice the right practice—the ultimate mechanism, all in one!

Suddenly, Zen teachings and koans began to illuminate themselves for me. Yet comprehension alone is never enough; in fact, it can even become an obstacle if it leads to spoon-fed insights. As Master Shengru often warns her disciples, indirect, non-experiential understanding can prevent one from perceiving their true mind. Similarly, the Buddha cautioned Ananda in the *Shurangama Sutra*, "Knowing is established from comprehension; henceforth, knowing is the root of ignorance." (知見立知。卽無明本)

In line with this, Yu-an, a Zen master from the Song Dynasty, one day encountered this sentence while studying the sutra and broke the sentence (known as a "period" in English) after the third character instead of the fourth, resulting in the reading, "[Once] comprehension is established, know that it is the root of ignorance." (知見立。知卽無明本) It is said that he attained great awakening upon this and was called the "Shurangama breaker"—breaking the unbreakable; attaining the unattainable. Beyond a kick or a shout, a pebble hitting bamboo, crossing a river, seeing peach blossoms, or hearing a rooster crows, it is reassuring for those who discern language and ruminate over words that this, too, is a Dharma gate to enter the great Way—even as the cautionary tales of Deshan burning his Diamond Sutra commentaries and Xiangyan burning his collection of sutras and books remind us of the danger that language can break the Way.

Master Shengru's teachings weave together an all-encompassing Dharma net of practice and realization. By integrating the essential teachings of the Buddha—what I now recognize as the Transcendental Palm of the Tathāgata—her work seamlessly combines deep samādhi practice and insight contemplation with the study of Tathāgatagarbha through Yogācāra teachings. This approach uses the small vehicle teachings as a foundation, complementing Ma-

hayana teachings centered on Prajñāpāramitā, Mahāvaipulya, and Zen. Her teachings bring clarity to all schools of thought, unraveling the mysteries and obscuration in Zen scriptures while unveiling the Buddha's many mitsugos—the true meaning of the Tathāgata's words—and guiding practitioners toward the realization of their true mind.

Such lucid and profound teachings, which connect all essential points and lead directly to the source in clear and simple language, are rare and unlike anything I have encountered in both Chinese and English. I vowed to find a way to make these teachings accessible to Western practitioners who rely on English—or rather, it was the power of spell from Master Shengru that compelled me to make the vow.

I sincerely believe this teaching can greatly benefit those who embrace it and practice it wholeheartedly. At the very least—as our Soto Zen ancestor Dongshan said, "It acts as a guide for beings; its use removes all pains"—it may assist psychotherapists in truly healing their patients, fostering an unbroken spirit and leading to a profound transformation of body and mind. It could also help produce a physicist worthy of the Nobel Prize or one deemed deluded by their peers. Moreover, it will likely help many Zen practitioners rectify misunderstandings about Emptiness, cultivate a clear view of karma without shying away from it, and deepen their understanding of the Heart Sutra, Xinxin Ming, Sandokai, Song of the Jewel Samadhi, Genjokoan, Fukanzazengi, and more, illuminating the treasury of the Dharma eye the Buddha and our ancestors gave us.

"An ancient Buddha and the open pillars intersecting—which pivot is this?" The character for "pivot" is "機" (jī in Chinese, ki in Japanese)—a significant word that ancient Zen masters frequently pointed to. Let's rephrase: "What *jī* is this?" Everyone went silent. Yunmen, showing his grandmotherly mind, answered himself: "Clouds emerging in the southern mountains, rains dropping in the northern mountains."

A number of hundred years later, Wansong remarked in *The Book of Serenity* (case 31), "Dropping seven and the eight."[1] But some

1. "落七落八" (luò qī luò bā) .

thirty to fifty years before Wansong, in the *Blue Cliff Record* (case 83), Yuanwu went even further with his grandmotherly mind. First, he remarked, "No involvement three thousand miles away; mixing seven, the eight cracked." [2] Quoting his teacher, Master Wuzu Fayan, he added, "Yunmen, after all, was timid. If it were me, I would tell him straight: it is the eighth *jī*."

For years, I thought these Zen ancestors were merely tossing around their mitsugos, thinking their finger-pointing offered little help to those of us with dulled faculties. Now, I see they were constantly revealing the manifestation of "quánjī" (全機)—the complete functioning of essence (Zenki in Japanese)—to their dulled monks.

Once, I served as the acting Jisha for my root teacher. For two days straight, I kept making mistakes in form without realizing they were mistakes. Finally, I caught one right after it happened. Later, I told her, hoping for praise for recognizing the error so quickly. She asked, "Did you catch it before or after?" Could one even catch a mistake before it occurs? My egoistic, praise-craving mano-āyatana, though deflated, must have been secretly working on this koan since then. One day, the pivoting of *jī*! Though it remains a deviation of mere fractions between heaven and earth—from a whit to a tael—compared to what Baizhang said: the roots and the dusts drop away, only the spirit light—the mind of illumination—shining forth.

But at last, I realize I have always been in the palm of the Tathāgata—whether I try to escape or not, whether I practice or not. I might as well practice, alongside the open pillars, the emerging clouds, and the falling rain—abiding in causes and conditions while relying on and resting in the palm of the Tathāgata.

Shugyo T. G. P.
October, 2024

2. The phrase "七花八裂" (qī huā bā liè) can have different interpretations depending on the context. For example, Yuanwu used it in Case 2: "If mental comprehension is not forgotten, you only see variegation and splittings" (若是情解未忘，便見七花八裂). In this context, "七" and "八" function as quantifiers or multipliers, while "花" (huā) refers to mixed elements. Yogācāra teachings add depth to the phrase, as Yuanwu demonstrated.

Gatha of Opening the Sutra

An unsurpassed, penetrating and perfect dharma
Is rarely encountered, even in a hundred thousand million kalpas.
Now that I see, hear, remember, and accept it,
I vow to discern the true meaning of the Tathagata's words.

~by Empress Wu Zetian

《開經偈》

無上甚深微妙法，百千萬劫難遭遇；
我今見聞得受持，願解如來眞實義。

～武則天

Hymn of the Meritorious Virtues of the Tathāgatagarbha

I have an attendant who stays with me, day and night;
following my every move, serving with devotion.

If I travel East, she does not go West;
if I sit down, she does not stand.

If I eat a bowl of rice, she does not drink a cup of tea;
if I see things, she does not hear sounds.

If I am a living being, she is not a ghost;
if I ascend to heaven, she does not descend to hell.

If I do good deeds, she helps me build virtuous merits;
if I commit wrongs, she lends her support.

If I practice, she leads me beyond the mundane;
if I drift with the world, she follows me into secular life.

If I contemplate, she offers seeds of consciousness;
if I quiet my mind, she grants warmth and life.

If I rejoice, she shares in my joy;
if I wish for death, she follows without hesitation.

She holds all secrets;
promotes the good, but does not conceal the bad.

People say she is foolish, but she is impartial—
in equality and fairness, she abides.

She is the source of both Buddhahood and samsara,
bringing forth deeds and the wheel of rebirth;
She accomplishes all mundane affairs,
manifesting the five skandhas-body.

The realms of Buddhas are her creation;
the hells manifest from her too.

With infinite meritorious virtues,
she cares not for praise or blame.

Her nature, pure, untouched by worldly things;
in the state of sages, she does not increase,
in the realm of the ordinary, she does not diminish.

Though she holds both defilement and purity,
neither taints her essence;
she envies not the Buddhas, nor forsakes the foolish.

Through countless kalpas, she remains nameless,
inherently without a self;
with infinite lifespan, she is beyond arising and ceasing.

She holds all dharmas but attains nothing;
she enjoys not the splendor of priceless jewels.

Born noble and rich, she humbles herself to poverty;
entering my body, dressed in soiled, tattered clothes.

A Cintāmaṇi jewel, she radiates the great thousandfold universe;
if I do not follow her, I remain in darkness forever.

Compared to her, I feel ashamed and humbled by guilt;
now, I vow to learn from her.

To wipe away defilement and clear my ignorance;
and to honor her nobility with my virtue and capability.

Blessing and wisdom she embodies—
Permanence, Bliss, Self and Purity;
perfecting all, her wisdom sun shines ever bright.

Chapter 1:
The Names of the Tathāgatagarbha

1.

The term "Tathāgatagarbha" commonly refers to the primordial essence of Thusness, present from the human-realm to the Buddha-realm and is inherently possessed by everyone, with each individual having their own. Before reaching the Buddha-realm, the Tathāgatagarbha contains ignorance within the seven consciousnesses of each sentient being. In the Buddha-realm, however, all ignorance has been extinguished. Nonetheless, the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha itself remains free from ignorance.

To distinguish Tathāgatagarbha between the Buddha-realm and the human realm, we refer to the Tathāgatagarbha in the Buddha-realm as "pure consciousness" or "amala-vijñāna" in Sanskrit. Tathāgatagarbha beyond the eighth ground, the Immovable—Acalā-bhūmi, is called "vipāka-vijñāna" (the consciousness that brings forth the fruits of karma), while everything below the eighth ground is generally referred to as "ālaya-vijñāna." Collectively, it is referred to as the eighth consciousness and Tathāgatagarbha.

The ālaya-vijñāna is another name for the Tathāgatagarbha used from the first to the seventh grounds of Bodhisattva fruition and is applicable to sentient beings and Bodhisattvas who have reached the Acalā-bhūmi. Through practices, Bodhisattvas continue purifying all their seven consciousness-minds,* and as their defilements stored in the ālaya-vijñāna reduce, their afflictions and self-grasping are cut off, and their afflicted karmic propensities—vāsana—are also extinguished. As their ignorance diminishes, the segmented birth and death—pariccheda-cyuti—ends, and they attain the eighth ground

of fruition. At this stage, the ālaya-vijñāna is then called vipāka-vijñāna, or the ninth consciousness.

[*Similar to the distinct terms in Sanskrit and Tibetan regarding "mind" in Buddhist teachings, the Chinese language offers its own unique designations. In this context, "心" (xīn) refers to the mind, "意" (yì) pertains to mental processes such as thinking, thought and ideas, while "識" (shì) stands for consciousness. The corresponding Sanskrit terms are citta, manas and vijñāna.

In the context of Yogācāra and Zen teachings, "mind" denotes the true mind, synonymous with "primordial essence". "Yì" as mano-āyatana (意根, yì gēn), which is also a form of consciousness—the seventh consciousness (第七識, dì qī shí). However, in some rare cases, ancient Zen masters referred to "yì" as mind. Conversely, "識" (shì) refers to consciousness in a general sense. However, any combination of these terms yields intricate meanings that merit clarification.

In this book, various phrases are used, such as mano-āyatana, also known as manas-vijñāna (末那識, mò nà shí), mano-vijñāna—the sixth consciousness (意識, yì shì), "conscious mind" (意識心, yì shì xīn), "consciousness-mind" (識心, shì xīn), and "mind-consciousness" or "mental consciousness" (心識, xīn shì).

For mano-āyatana, the Sanskrit term indicates that it is the faculty responsible for bringing forth the mano-vijñāna. Its mental formations are hidden and subtle, and because it does not correspond with language, most people are unaware of its existence or misunderstand its functionings and characteristics. According to Master Shengru, many of its attributes remain unknown to most beings, and one can truly learn about them only by advancing one's "consciousness-only" wisdom and directly perceiving these mental formations. In simple terms, subconsciousness—manifested as "gut feelings," "premonitions," "anxieties" and abrupt bodily reactions—is a coarse mental formation of mano-āyatana.

The term "conscious mind" highlights the cognitive and discriminative aspects of consciousness, reflecting ongoing mental processes. As a collective term, it refers to cognition and awareness that arise when the six sense faculties engage with the six sensory realms, leading to mental processes where delusions, differentiation, craving and other mental activities occur. In other words, the conscious mind operates collectively through the six consciousnesses and is considered one of the false minds. Occasionally, the term may also include the seventh consciousness. In Chapter 7, Master Shengru

emphasized that "all aspects of practice and perception are primarily understood by the conscious mind. Without it, we cannot differentiate or comprehend. This underscores the conscious mind as an indispensable tool for our practice." There is a saying: "using the false mind to attain the true mind." Therefore, understanding the true nature of the conscious mind is crucial to our practice.

While "consciousness-mind" (shì xīn) is the cognizant mind and functions as the faculty of awareness, it emphasizes the perceiving and comprehending aspects of "mind-consciousness." As for "mind-consciousness" (xīn shì) or "mental consciousness," the term conveys the psychological aspects of consciousness (psycho-cognitive processes), emphasizing the mind as the foundation for consciousness and overall mental activities. It can also function as a noun, referring to both mind and consciousness as a whole, including the eight consciousnesses, their existence, and functionalities. These two terms are frequently used in Yogācāra, the former relating to the nature of consciousness and the latter to analyzing mental structures.]

Although its name changed, its primordial essence remains the same, just as a person assumes a new position and their title changes accordingly, but they remain the same individual.

The ālaya-vijñāna changes its name to reflect the transformation of the seeds stored within it. As the content of these seeds changes, the name changes to accurately reflect its state. The name indicates the stage and degree of practice of a Bodhisattva's seven consciousnesses and the extent of their purity. As a Bodhisattva continues their practice and diminishes the ignorance in their seven consciousnesses, and when they reach the Buddha-realm, the names of the ālaya-vijñāna and vipāka-vijñāna also change. It becomes known as amala-vijñāna, or the Great Mirror Wisdom—Ādarśa-jñāna, or simply Thusness, or the Tenth Consciousness. Despite these changes, it remains the same primordial essence, with the seeds contained within having completely transformed.

Sentient beings, from the human realm to the Buddha-realm, share the same primordial essence throughout. It is the content stored within the primordial essence that differs and results in different names. Therefore, it is a misguided view to claim that the ālaya-vijñāna is borne out of the Tathāgatagarbha—they originally

are one primordial essence and do not have a birth and being born relationship and are unable to give birth to themselves. This is akin to how we assign different names to a person at various stages of their life: infant, child, teenager, youth, adult, elderly. The title changes accordingly, but the person remains the same. Similarly, a man can be called a son, a father, and a husband, despite holding different titles but always being the same individual.

2.

The Tathāgatagarbha has many different names, each corresponding to a different stage in one's practice. These names reflect the specific teachings and emphases found in some sutras that describe the Tathāgatagarbha. Tathāgatagarbha is the general name used to refer to its primordial essence; this name indicates its role in storing sentient beings' karmic seeds, with an inherent nature to both store and be stored, as well as its appropriating nature—it is the true essence of how a sentient being can become a Buddha. When the impurities in ālaya-vijñāna are completely purified and ignorance is extinguished, the phenomenon of arising and ceasing, as well as transmuting, also ceases, and the Tathāgatagarbha then becomes known as amala-vijñāna.

The primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha, when joined together with the defilements and phenomenon of arising and ceasing in the seven consciousnesses, the name changes to vipāka-vijñāna and ālaya-vijñāna. Whether these phenomenon elements join together or not, the Tathāgatagarbha and the ālaya-vijñāna are always of the same primordial essence. The difference lies in the karmic seeds within them. For example, consider a room: if it is used for sleeping, it contains a bed and is called a bedroom; for general use, it is a living room; for storage, it is a storage room. But in essence, it remains the same room.

3.

The naming of the eighth consciousness follows the order of the preceding seven consciousnesses. Like them, it possesses the intrin-

sic nature of discernment and cognition and is defined as a consciousness, hence its sequential designation. It serves as a general term to distinguish it from the seven consciousnesses. However, it is also a mind, possessing the characteristics of a mind. In its essence, the eighth consciousness is pure and undefiled, but because it functions as a storehouse for karmic seeds and does not differentiate between good or bad karmic seeds, it contains the impure karmic seeds of the seven consciousnesses. Each time the seven consciousness-minds generate greed, hatred and delusion, these defiled seeds are all stored in the eighth consciousness, subsequently making it impure as a whole and resulting in the nature of arising and ceasing, which is thus called the ālaya-vijñāna—it is not that the ālaya-vijñāna itself is impure. In the *Laṅkāvatāra Sutra*, the Buddha speaks of the profundity and inscrutability of the primordial essence of the ālaya-vijñāna and vipāka-vijñāna, and how difficult it is for ordinary beings to fathom. The Buddha was concerned that they might misinterpret the teaching, and thus he did not teach explicitly on this teaching in many sutras.

Different sutras provide various appellations for the eighth consciousness, such as boundlessness, the extent of non-aging, the extent of non-dying, the extent of non-ending, the extent of non-suffering, the extent of non-existence, reliance on birth and death, self-reliance, dharma-reliance, dharma-lamp and many others. These names reflect the diverse functionings and characteristics of the eighth consciousness. By thoroughly understanding all these differences, we can gain a broader comprehension of the Buddhadharma.

4.

The ālaya-vijñāna and the Tathāgatagarbha are of one primordial essence. The nature of the Tathāgatagarbha is the nature of the ālaya-vijñāna, which is the wondrous functioning and characteristic brought forth by the Tathāgatagarbha, also called Buddha-nature—Buddhatā. The Tathāgatagarbha is akin to a lamp, while the Buddha-nature is akin to the light the lamp emits. If there is no lamp, there will be no light. When the lamp is turned on, light permeates.

The primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha is non-arising and non-ceasing. As long as one is a sentient being, one has the Tathāgatagarbha and, consequently, the Buddha-nature, allowing one to attain Buddhahood.

It is incorrect to state that the ālaya-vijñāna can transform into the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, and that the suffix "nature" indicates that the primordial essence transforms into the Buddha-nature. There is no transformation between the primordial essence and the Buddha-nature. The primordial essence will always be the primordial essence, likewise, the Buddha-nature will always be the Buddha-nature. Additionally, the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha cannot be transformed into the Tathāgatagarbha. The Tathāgatagarbha and the ālaya-vijñāna refer to the same mind, with the difference being their naming.

The functioning through which the Tathāgatagarbha manifests its nature-perceiving [kensho] is called the Buddha-nature. The Tathāgatagarbha cannot fundamentally transform into the Buddha-nature and vice versa; if they are transformable, the Tathāgatagarbha would be gone, and there would be no Buddha-nature.

When one awakens one's [true] mind, one verifies one's Tathāgatagarbha—this is the first gate referred to in the Chan school; perceiving one's nature is perceiving one's Buddha-nature or the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha—the second gate. The stages of the two gates and their contents differ significantly, thus, the Tathāgatagarbha and its nature are not inter-transformable, nor are the ālaya-vijñāna and the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha. One is the primordial essence, while the other is the nature-perceiving functioning of that essence. They are inter-dependable but cannot inter-transform.

5.

If we forsake the Bodhi, there will be no Bodhisattva Path, nor will there be a Śrāvaka path. Because of Bodhi, there is One Vehicle Path—Ekayānamārga; because of Bodhi, there are both the Mahayana and the Hinayana Paths; because of Bodhi, there is the path of liberation for the Śrāvaka, the path for the Bodhisattva, and the

path for the One Vehicle. Without the Bodhi mind, there would be no Buddhadharma, and no path to attain Buddhahood and the world would cease. Thus, the Thusness self-nature is the source for all dharmas and the fundamental fabric of all dharmas.

This Bodhi is known by various names such as the self-nature pure mind, the ālaya-vijñāna, the Tathāgatagarbha, the eighth consciousness, the primordial awareness, the vipāka-vijñāna, the amala-vijñāna, Thusness—Tathātā—and so on. All these names denote the same Bodhi mind. Similar to how a man can be a father, a son, a husband, a boss, or a subordinate in different contexts, and despite these titles, we recognize him as the same person, the true mind is understood similarly—it is always the primordial essence of Thusness, regardless of the name used to describe it.

6.

The ālaya-vijñāna is synonymous with true mind for unawakened beings and Bodhisattvas who have not yet reached the eighth ground. It signifies that this primordial essence contains the segmented birth and death of sentient beings, along with the ignorance of seven consciousnesses, as well as their afflictions and afflicted karmic propensities. The name ādāna-vijñāna (appropriating consciousness), also known as vipāka-vijñāna, indicates that it is freed from all these afflictions and karmic propensities. However, there remains seeds of subtle ignorance since beginningless time yet to be purified and at this stage, a Bodhisattva has not yet attained Buddhahood and they still faces transformative birth and death—acintya-pāriṇāmikī-cyuti; the term vipāka-vijñāna is used for Bodhisattvas above the eighth ground. At this advanced stage, there are no longer any seeds of segmented birth and death, but the seeds of transformative birth and death still remain.

7.

A sentient being's Tathāgatagarbha differs from the Great Mirror Wisdom in the Buddha-realm, for it contains karmic seeds of

ignorance and impurity from all seven consciousnesses. These seeds continuously arise, cease and transmute, giving the Tathāgatagarbha characteristics of neither ceasing nor arising, and neither defiled nor pure nature. In contrast, the Great Mirror Wisdom is the result of the transformation and purification of the Tathāgatagarbha in the Bodhisattva realm, where the impure seeds in all seven consciousness-minds have been completely transformed.

The two are of the same mind, yet they differ in their functionings and the seeds they housed. For example, the Great Mirror Wisdom possesses twenty-one mental factors—caitasika, whereas a sentient being's Tathāgatagarbha possesses only five universal mental factors—pañca-sarvatragāḥ-caitasikāḥ. The Great Mirror Wisdom is characterized by the four perfect virtues: Permanence—Nitya, Bliss—Sukha, Self—Ātma and Purity—Śubha. In contrast, a sentient being's Tathāgatagarbha is neither impermanent nor permanent, neither defiled nor pure. It undergoes arising, ceasing and transmutation, experiences suffering rather than bliss, and lacks an intrinsic self.

8.

Some say that the eighth consciousness is not the Tathāgatagarbha, and the Tathāgatagarbha is not the ālaya-vijñāna; they also question whether the ālaya-vijñāna is the vipāka-vijñāna. If this supposition were true, it would imply that a sentient being possesses multiple primordial essences of Thusness. Such an assertion is fundamentally mistaken and contradicts the Buddha's teachings. A sentient being inherently possesses eight consciousnesses; if the Tathāgatagarbha were not the ālaya-vijñāna, there would be an extra consciousness. Conversely, if the eighth consciousness were not the Tathāgatagarbha, this additional consciousness would not align with the fact and the Noble Proof of Oral Evidence—Āgama-pramāna [given by the Buddha].

There is only one true mind and the rest are false minds. If there were an extra true mind, how would it function? How would multiple true minds interact within a sentient being? How do we

address and clarify these questions? Therefore, the various appellations for the true mind all point to the same primordial essence of mind, with different names employed from various angles to express its primordial essence.

The eighth consciousness, the ālaya-vijñāna or the Tathāgatagarbha, regardless of the name used, is the true mind in relation to the seven consciousnesses. However, a sentient being's true mind still contains the impure karmic seeds from the seven consciousnesses and they continuously arise, cease and transmute, transforming the ālaya-vijñāna into neither defiled nor pure primordial essence. Accordingly, the ālaya-vijñāna is not yet a complete true self.

The complete true Self is the amala-vijñāna that only a Buddha possesses. In this pure state of the true Self, the karmic seeds are pure and undefiled, devoid of arising, ceasing and transmuting. It embodies Permanence, Bliss, Self and Purity. It is the true and authentic Self akin to pure gold, while the ālaya-vijñāna and the vipāka-vijñāna share the essence of gold but contain impurities.

Chapter 2:
The Eight Types of Non-Middle Way of the Tathāgatagarbha

The eight non-Middle Way types refer to the principle of the Middle Way inherent in the primordial essence of Tathāgatagarbha. They encompass eight specific negations and countless other negations characterized by the nature of the Middle Way. Specifically, they are: neither defiled nor pure, neither arising nor ceasing, neither increasing nor decreasing, neither coming nor going, neither empty nor non-empty, neither one nor different, neither breaking nor changing, neither true nor false.

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, Chapter 4, the Buddha speaks of some innumerable negations. In the three realms of existence—trailokya —and the eighteen realms of phenomena, these negations are: neither big nor small, neither long nor short, neither green nor yellow, neither male nor female, neither human nor ghost, neither Buddha nor sentient being, neither inside the three realms of existence nor outside the three realms of existence, neither east nor west, neither south nor north, neither above nor below, neither this nor that, neither these nor those and so no; in the five skandhas, they manifest as such: neither eating nor non-eating, neither drinking nor non-drinking, neither sitting nor non-sitting, neither speaking nor non-speaking, neither walking nor non-walking and neither lying down nor non-lying down.

The Tathāgatagarbha is precisely these dharmas and yet none of these dharmas; it is not within these dharmas, but at the same time, it is not absent from them. This is the true Middle Way, which neither remains on either side nor is it absent from both sides, nor does it stay in the middle. Only the Tathāgatagarbha possesses such an essence, making it the mind of the Middle Way, whereas the false

minds of the seven consciousnesses always dwell on either side and, therefore, lack the nature of the Middle Way.

The Tathāgatagarbha is neither such nor non-such; for example, it has no mouth and cannot speak or eat. However, it is not absent from the speaking and eating that the five skandhas perform. Similarly, the Tathāgatagarbha possesses nothing and does nothing, yet it is not separate from these actions, because all dharmas involve the participation of the Tathāgatagarbha and are activated by it.

The Tathāgatagarbha is neither male nor female, neither non-male nor non-female, yet gender is transmuted and sustained by it. When a sentient being creates these gender karmic formations, it records and stores the karmic seeds and when conditions ripen, these karmic seeds result in them transforming into either male or female. When a sentient being is in their mother's womb, the Tathāgatagarbha transmutes their sex according to their karmic seeds. The Tathāgatagarbha is inherently genderless, yet the five skandhas it transmutes designate gender. If a sentient being conducts only pure karmic actions, their form-body will be genderless. For instance, the Devas above the Desire Realm are genderless and sentient beings in other Buddha-realms are also genderless.

The Tathāgatagarbha is non-human, non-ghost, non-Buddha, non-sentient being, for it has no form. To say it is something or not something is both incorrect, for all dharmas are born and manifested within it, and as such, which dharma is not it? If we go into detail and to explain thoroughly the Tathāgatagarbha, its primordial nature, its functioning and its Middle Way's nature, we would find that our discussion wouldn't be exhausted even after countless kalpas.

Once a sentient being has verified their Tathāgatagarbha through practice, they gradually gain the ability to observe these dharmas, leading to a corresponding increase in wisdom, known as Subsequently Attained Wisdom—Pṛṣṭhalabdhajñāna.

When one first awaken to the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, one usually realizes Comprehensive Wisdom—Sarvajñāna, in which the *Heart Sutra* refers to as the outline of the intrinsic nature of

Tathāgatagarbha; as one's practice continues, one will gradually learn the details of every aspect, its each functioning and each characteristic utilizing the Non-Discriminating Wisdom—Nirvikalpajñāna—one now possesses. When this wisdom is thoroughly complete and perfect, one realizes the Bodhisattva Path Wisdom—Mārgajñatā.

The connotations and principles of the eight types of non-Middle Way are as follows.

1. Neither defiled nor pure

1.1. The pure primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha is sometimes referred to as the self-nature pure mind or luminous pure mind. It is free from defilements, afflictions, karmic propensities and ignorance, yet it records the wholesome, unwholesome and neutral actions of the five skandhas, storing the karmic seeds of the three karmas: bodily, verbal and mental. The impure actions generated by the seven consciousnesses are stored within its primordial essence, making it appear as a whole to contain impurity. The self-nature pure mind and the impure karmic seeds from the seven consciousnesses combine together, like a clean cup that becomes dirty when filled with dirty water, while the cup itself remains inherently pure and unstained. This forms the neither defiled nor pure essence of the ālaya-vijñāna.

The Tathāgatagarbha can be compared to a new, clean house. If people store garbage in the house, it becomes a garbage storage, anything that comes out of it is then dirty. The new house represents the pure Tathāgatagarbha, while the ālaya-vijñāna represents the garbage storage. Though they are the same house, the contents stored within change its name and perceived nature. This analogy illustrates the neither defiled nor pure essence of the Tathāgatagarbha.

To unmask the original face of this luminous pure mind, we must continuously perfume wholesome dharmas into our seven consciousnesses, thereby removing the impure seeds and rendering them completely pure. When all impurity is eradicated, the Tathāgatagarbha transforms into the amala-vijñāna.

1.2. The Tathāgatagarbha is inherently luminous and pure. However, due to containing the impure karmic seeds from the seven consciousness-minds, it manifests as a neither defiled nor pure mind. It collects and stores these impure karmic seeds, transforming the impure seven consciousness-minds and the impure actions of body, speech and mind accordingly, and manifesting various negative karmic fruits. The Tathāgatagarbha gives birth to all these dharmas with its unique functioning principle, manifesting various dharmas according to the karmic seeds it stores. This functioning is free from the volition of seven consciousnesses.

Even if we don't wish for it to manifest various negative karmic fruits, the Tathāgatagarbha will still function according to the principle of causes and conditions. Whatever it produces or transmutes, it has no volition of its own and cannot randomly produce dharmas, for it only produces dharmas according to the ripening of the karmic seeds it has stored.

All we need to do is cultivate and practice the false minds—the seven consciousnesses. We don't need to worry about how the true mind functions or what seeds it transmutes, as it is not within our control. By practicing the false minds, we produce only wholesome karma, transforming our mental formations to wholesomeness and freeing them from ignorance. This will result in only wholesome seeds being stored in our Tathāgatagarbha. When the time is ripe, it will produce these wholesome karmic seeds, creating a pure and wonderful world and giving us dignified bodies that construct only pure mental formations.

If we wish for our Tathāgatagarbha to produce dharmas that bring us contentment, our false minds must engage in wholesome conduct and refrain from unwholesome karmic actions. This practice results in storing only good karmic seeds and removing bad karmic seeds that are already stored within. Transforming the nature of the seven consciousnesses involves breaking off unwholesomeness and cultivating wholesomeness. Finally, when our mind-ground becomes pure and unstained, we will make all dharmas perfect and complete, and our Tathāgatagarbha will transform from being neither defiled nor pure to the pure amala-

vijñāna. The way to practice is to perfume our false minds with wholesome dharmas by first cutting off afflictions, and then breaking off karmic propensities, which lead to the eradication of both dust-like defilements—paramāṇu-kleśa and the delusion of ignorance—avidyā-moha. Once all seeds are purified, one attains Buddhahood.

2. Neither arise nor cease

2.1. The Tathāgatagarbha has always existed as it has since beginningless time It is neither created nor born and it will not cease in future kalpas either. It cannot be destroyed by anyone or anything, for it is the indestructible Vajra-essence—Svābhāvikakāya —with the nature of non-arising and non-ceasing. The karmic seeds stored within it are subject to change, and our practice aims to transform these karmic seeds; we do not practice to change its luminous and pure inherent nature.

Although it is inherently non-arising and non-ceasing, yet dharmas acted upon by the false minds are arising and ceasing. The nature of the five skandhas and the seven consciousnesses themselves also exhibit phenomena of arising and ceasing. For example, the false minds may cultivate the noble eightfold path under certain conditions but may stop practicing when circumstances change; it signifies that this practice itself is a phenomena of arising and ceasing.

The Tathāgatagarbha does not engage in such practices. It does not study the Buddha way, practice for Buddhahood, receive or uphold precepts, cultivate samādhi, or develop wisdom. It lacks nothing and inherently possesses all dharmas. Unlike the false minds, it transcends dualities and is free from the nature of arising and ceasing. Yet it is not disengaged from practice; when the five skandhas and the seven consciousnesses engage in practice, it facilitates this process by generating the requisite karmic seeds and, concurrently, storing and documenting the entire process and outcomes. In the future, when causes and conditions mature, these karmic seeds manifest. Thus, our practice does not separate from the Tathāgatagarbha.

Moreover, the Tathāgatagarbha does not reside in the middle either, as this would imply it is merely another dharma—it transcends all dharmas and is the non-abiding true mind.

The four noble truths are not the Middle Way as they are practiced by false minds; the five skandhas are subject to the cycle of suffering, its cause, cessation and the path leading to the cessation of suffering. The Tathāgatagarbha is not subject to these.

In contrast, the Tathāgatagarbha transcends the four noble truths. It is neither suffering, nor the cause of suffering, nor cessation, nor the path leading to the cessation of suffering. Furthermore, it is also not the absence of these truths, for the dharmas of the four noble truths depend on it.

If the Tathāgatagarbha did not store karmic seeds, sentient beings may freely create karma without bearing karmic fruits, nor would they have the five skandhas bodies. All practices, whether wholesome or unwholesome, are supported by the Tathāgatagarbha. For instance, wholesome seeds produced through the practice of noble eightfold path, are stored in it. Similarly, cessation of suffering through practice involves extinguishing stored suffering karmic seeds.

In essence, no dharma can be separated from the Tathāgatagarbha, including the twelve links of dependent origination—dvādaśāṅga-pratītyasamutpāda—practiced by Pratyekabuddhas. It stores the seeds of ignorance, maintains the mental formations of body, speech and mind, and brings forth the six consciousnesses. The entire cycle of rebirth—from fertilization to embryo, from fetus to birth—is shaped and transformed by it. Similarly, the six sense spheres, the five skandhas-body, the six sense faculties, and the six sensory realms are all manifested by it, while the skandhas of sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness are its functionings.

When a Pratyekabuddha practice the twelve links of dependent origination, their Tathāgatagarbha facilitate this process by delivering the necessary wholesome seeds and assist in recording and storing them. During their contemplative meditation their Tathāgatagarbha coordinates by delivering consciousness seeds and

as they extinguish the seeds of ignorance, their Tathāgatagarbha also extinguish the ignorance previously stored.

Discussing the twelve links of dependent origination without acknowledging the role of the Tathāgatagarbha would lead to mental proliferation; without the Tathāgatagarbha, there would be no foundational basis for conditions to arise, including the twelve links themselves. Thus, the teaching of dependent origination pertains to the phenomena of arising and ceasing, not the Middle Way.

In the context of dependent arising, consciousness arises due to name-and-form—nāmarūpa [is identified as the mano-āyatana], and name-and-form arises due to consciousness. This consciousness is the ālaya-vijñāna, the eighth consciousness, which is synonymous with the Tathāgatagarbha and represents the nature of the Middle Way. Without consciousness, the teaching of dependent arising cannot be established.

Both Mahayana and Hinayana teachings fundamentally rely on the Tathāgatagarbha. Without it, there would be no basis for understanding suffering, emptiness, impermanence, no-self, as well as the four noble truths and the existence of the five skandhas. Consequently, the practices and the cycle of samsara would not have a foundation.

2.2. The Tathāgatagarbha serves as the foundational origin from which all dharmas arise; it is unborn and has existed since beginningless time, and there is no dharma that can give birth to it. However, it alone cannot manifest the myriad dharmas without relying on various causes and conditions. It necessitates having the seeds of myriad dharmas within it so that these dharmas can be brought forth. Additionally, it relies on the grasping of the mind faculty—mano-āyatana [also known as manas-vijñāna, the seventh consciousness, it is the foundation for the sixth consciousness to arise.] If any one cause is lacking, it is unable to manifest even a single dharma, let alone myriad dharmas. Only when the conditions are ripe and complete can all dharmas be manifested. Thus, it operates in accordance with the principle of dependent origination,

where the manifestation of dharmas is contingent upon causes and conditions.

The Tathāgatagarbha is the origin of heaven and earth, the primogenitor of all existence and stands independent without reliance on any conditions. If it were to manifest in any form, it would inherently depend on the essence from which it arises. This truth is profound and challenging to comprehend fully. Those who have a practice of contemplative meditation may begin to verify and awaken to it.

In the Buddha-realm, even the Bhagavan's true mind relies on various conditions to manifest a five skandhas-body. His expounding of teachings, establishment of precepts and saving of sentient beings all depend on numerous conditions, as no single cause alone can bring about the manifestation of dharmas. Dharmas arise and manifest only through the convergence of conditions.

When the Bhagavan was born into our world, it too required numerous conditions. Before his birth, he observed whether the conditions of sentient beings in the Sahā world were ripe and awaited the right moment. The conditions for sentient beings to practice and for his birth were interdependent. Prior to his arrival, he sent his disciples ahead to coordinate with him in spreading his teachings.

Even after his enlightenment, the Bhagavan's expounding of the teachings of the three vehicles depended on countless conditions. His decisions on what to teach were not arbitrary but responsive to the conditions of sentient beings and other relevant factors. This further affirms that all dharmas manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha are subject to arising and ceasing, and that they do not constitute the Middle Way.

2.3. Is the ālaya-vijñāna arising and ceasing?

The ālaya-vijñāna itself is inherently non-arising and non-ceasing, yet it stores karmic seeds from the seven consciousnesses that do arise, cease and transmute. This dual nature means that the ālaya-vijñāna as a whole exhibits an arising and ceasing nature. While the karmic seeds within it permanently change and transmute, the essence of the ālaya-vijñāna remains unchanged. To

illustrate, consider a cup filled with water: the water may change from clean to dirty, but the cup itself remains constant. Similarly, the ālaya-vijñāna is like the cup, while the water represents the karmic seeds of the seven consciousnesses. Therefore, we describe the ālaya-vijñāna as a composite entity characterized by both non-arising and non-ceasing nature with its arising, ceasing and transmuting attributes.

The Tathāgatagarbha's working principle is extremely subtle and difficult to comprehend, making it challenging for a meditator to find its [formless] trace, and this often leads to the misconception that the Tathāgatagarbha and the ālaya-vijñāna are merely conceptual names without real essence. This is a prevalent nihilistic view among sentient beings in the age of decline.

But the ālaya-vijñāna is incontestably real, and for this reason, the five skandhas are, without a doubt, unreal. The Buddha taught the Āgama teachings to help sentient beings eliminate the notion of a self based on the misconception of the five skandhas. The mundane world comprises real and unreal dharmas, and if we mistakenly view the ālaya-vijñāna as unreal due to its arising and ceasing nature, we would wrongly regard certain phenomena within the five skandhas as real and permanent. For example, believing that the [sixth] consciousness having no thought in a particular state of samādhi is real and that it is non-arising and non-ceasing, is the root of the wrong view. If the five skandhas and the sixth consciousness were substantial, the Buddha would not have taught the four noble truths. Thus, the primordial essence of the ālaya-vijñāna is non-arising and non-ceasing, while the seeds contained within it have the characteristic of arising, ceasing and transmuting.

3. Neither increase nor decrease

The functionings and characteristics of Tathāgatagarbha are neither increasing nor decreasing. Whether we practice or not, it remains as it is because it requires no practice itself; it does not become purer if we uphold and maintain the precepts or does it reduce defilements, as it does not receive, uphold or violate the precepts, and its self-nature is free from defilements; it does not

become wiser through study, as it does not study, nor does it become foolish due to lack of study or aging; it does not become richer or poorer due to hard work or laziness, as the seeds of fire, wind, water, earth and the seeds of the seven consciousnesses it stored are neither increasing nor decreasing.

In contrast, the functions and characteristics of the seven consciousnesses are always increasing or decreasing, and their mental factors are constantly changing. These consciousnesses can become wiser or more foolish, increase or reduce wholesome or unwholesome seeds, become pure or defiled, and understand or forget things. They are in a state of constant flux. Consequently, we can conclude that the seven consciousness-minds, which enable us to comprehend and learn about all phenomena, are true or false minds. The false mind progresses through stages from unknown to known, from ignorance to awakening. Meanwhile, the true mind remains unchanged.

4. Neither coming nor going

4.1. The Tathāgatagarbha is formless and does not exhibit the characteristic of arising and ceasing, which are typical phenomena associated with physical form. It has existed since beginningless time without any dharma creating or birthing it, hence it has no origin of coming. Similarly, when the five skandhas-body ceases, resulting in the cessation of mundane phenomena, it remains unchanged in its perpetual existence, without any origin of departing or going away.

Moreover, it pervades the five skandhas, the six sense faculties, the six sensory realms, the twelve sense bases and the eighteen realms of phenomena. It pervades everywhere and throughout the three times, permanently supporting their activities, thereby imbuing the five skandhas-body that transcends the concepts of coming and going. Similarly, it transcends coming and going with the six sense faculties, the six sensory realms and the six consciousnesses, it does not undergo coming and going in the three realms of existence, and it exists beyond the cycle of coming and going.

Although it is devoid of coming and going, arising and ceasing, increasing and decreasing, defilement and purity, yet the dharmas it manifests exhibit these characteristics. For instance, the Nirmāṇakāya can be born and can enter Nirvāṇa. Similarly, the bodies of Bodhisattva Mahasattvas also undergo birth and death; when the Buddha and Bodhisattvas are born into our world, their bodies possess the Tathāgatagarbha's non-arising and non-ceasing nature, as well as the arising and ceasing nature of the five skandhas. They come and go in the midst of this nature, utilizing these characteristics to effectively save sentient beings.

If there were no phenomena of arising and ceasing, the Tathāgatagarbha would be the only remaining essence in Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, leaving them unable to help sentient beings. If only the Tathāgatagarbha existed, it would signify the nirvanic state of Arhatship. The Buddha repeatedly warned Bodhisattvas against entering such a Nirvāṇa, as it diverges from the path to Buddhahood; the Buddha himself did not choose this path, instead, he attained Non-abiding Nirvāṇa—Apratisthita-nirvāṇa, a nirvanic state that is not fixed permanently and does not abide in any place. He does not remain in this state but manifests innumerable five skandhas bodies according to karmic conditions and affinities to save sentient beings. These manifestations of five skandhas bodies exhibit an arising and ceasing nature. They can cease at any time and later manifest again in different worlds where suitable conditions and affinities are present. There is no cessation to these manifestations—they perpetually arise and cease, tirelessly and infinitely benefiting sentient beings.

4.2. The true mind has no coming and going, yet it pervades everywhere. It is formless and free from the characteristics of coming and going. Since it pervades everywhere, it would be incorrect to claim that it moves from one dharma to another, as this would imply a lack of pervasiveness. It transcends the phenomena of coming and going because no one can perceive such movement. Wind comes and goes, and air, too, comes and goes because they are both material dharma—rūpadharma. However, empty space neither

comes nor goes because it is formless. Like empty space, the true mind neither comes nor goes, yet it pervades everywhere.

The true mind arrives with no coming-form as it always accompanies the mano-āyatana. It has no residing-form while in the womb, and when the five skandhas cease, it leaves the five skandhas-body without a departing-form. It arises from non-coming and goes from non-going; it neither comes nor goes, hence it is termed "thus come, thus go"—Tathāgata. Thus come, the mind arrives without movement and form; thus go, the mind departs without movement and form. It is always thus, exactly as it is. If there were movement or form, it would not be thus.

"Thus" [in Chinese] means original and constant, remaining as it is. Its unchanging, immutable essence pervades everywhere, encompassing, upholding and sustaining all dharmas. This exemplifies its great compassion, as it does not forsake any dharma. To forsake them would mean their absence; by not forsaking them, dharmas persist as they are. The Thusness of the true mind is formless, not shifting or flowing like mist or air; it is devoid of mental formations, subjective viewpoints, determinations, ideologies and thoughts; it neither rules nor interacts with the phenomena of the six sensory realms; it is immutable—eternally thus.

4.3. One who is thus come, yet there is no coming; one who is thus go, yet there is no going. This thus come, thus go is the true reality of all dharmas—Sarvadharmatathatā, the ultimate meaning of Tathāgata.

The Tathāgata manifests all phenomena of the mundane world and intermingles with them; it seems to arrive amidst the myriad phenomena of the mundane world, but in truth, it does not come, for it is formless and devoid of any form of coming and going. It possesses no shape, no attribute, no dimension, no form of roundness or squareness, and hence, no concept of coming and going applies to it; it manifests when conditions ripen, yet it has no form to manifest. When the forms of mundane phenomena cease, it departs without any form of departure. If there were coming and going, when it arrives in the east, it would be unable to depart to the

west. It exists within all myriad forms of the mundane world, manifesting impartially; it pervades the five skandhas, seven consciousnesses, six sense faculties, six sensory realms, the twelve sense bases and the eighteen realms of phenomena. Whether in heaven or on earth, as long as there are seven consciousness-minds, it remains present without ever departing.

Although manifested in the mundane world, the Tathāgata does not live in it; to find it, we must seek a formless mind that transcends the forms of the mundane world and goes beyond the manifestations of the seven consciousnesses in myriad forms. This true mind impartially functions and manifests all dharmas, yet remains undisturbed, unmoving and immutable in its Thusness; embodying infinite meritorious virtues, this thus come shares the same essence with sentient beings, equally and impartially giving without limitation or hindrance—without mental formations, greed, hatred and delusion. It does not cling to a sense of self, for it seeks nothing, takes nothing and does not depend on external conditions.

4.4. There is no subtle single dharma outside of the Tathāgatagarbha. Thus, when it interconnects and depends on all dharmas, it is interconnected with itself. It neither comes nor goes, not even touching its Seat of Enlightenment—Bodhimaṇḍa, yet pervading its own Dharma Realm. Each dharma and all dharmas are the expressions of Thusness and the Tathāgatagarbha does not move from one dharma to another, and therefore, it does not manifest the form of coming and going. The mano-āyatana too, does not manifest the form of coming and going; it accompanies the Tathāgatagarbha and pervades all dharmas whether in heaven or on earth.

Let's say the Tathāgatagarbha manifests in the Pure Land. However, the Pure Land itself exists within the Tathāgatagarbha; there is no separation of distance or space between them, nor is there a difference in time. Even the entire universe and empty space reside within the Tathāgatagarbha. In this context, the Tathāgatagarbha does not need to travel to the Pure Land. The mano-āyatana follows this same principle, arriving in the Pure Land in the snap of a finger. Consequently, the idea that sentient beings

are reborn into the Pure Land after passing away is fundamentally a fallacy, for rebirth is simply a characteristic of birthing, and its nature remains the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha.

5. Neither empty nor non-empty [becoming]

5.1. The Tathāgatagarbha embodies both intrinsic empty and non-empty natures. Its empty nature entails being formless, without eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind [this mind refers to mano-āyatana] of the six sense faculties; it lacks form, sound, smell, taste, touch and mental objects of the six sensory realms; and it does not possess the eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness and mind consciousness [mano-vijñāna]. In other words, it transcends the eighteen realms of phenomena and the five skandhas—form, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness; it is devoid of ignorance, volitional formations, consciousness, name-and-form, the six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, old age and death, as described in the twelve links of dependent origination. It is absent from the four noble truths, wisdom, or attainment of any kind; it is utterly empty—a primordial essence known as the Mind of Emptiness.

Yet it possesses an intrinsic nature of becoming—non-empty—with true meritorious virtues. It stores and preserves infinite karmic seeds of a sentient being, capable of generating the great seeds that form the five skandhas and the three realms of existence, which then are able to manifest worlds in the ten directions, the physical universe and bring forth a sentient being's five skandhas-body.

5.2. Every single dharma is created by the Tathāgatagarbha, not merely tens of thousands, but myriad and infinite dharmas. All dharmas—except the Tathāgatagarbha itself—exist within it, whether it be empty space or the incalculable Buddha-realms in the ten directions; there is not a single dharma that lies outside of this One True Dharma Realm. Myriad dharmas are akin to the monkey king in *Journey to the West*, and the Tathāgatagarbha is like the

Tathāgata in the novel—the monkey can never escape from the palm of the Tathāgata.

One might ask how the Tathāgatagarbha came into existence. The *Heart Sutra* explains that the Tathāgatagarbha neither comes nor goes, neither arises nor ceases—it simply "is as it is." This principle is not a set of ordained rules or doctrines established by various Buddhas; rather, myriad Buddhas across the ten directions have realized this Ultimate Truth and have expounded it so that sentient beings can attain the same realization.

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha states that "the empty space in the ten directions is like a cloud patch in the sky born from one's mind." This clearly illustrates that empty space is born from the Tathāgatagarbha and is but a tiny speck within it. Empty space is just one of the infinite dharmas manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha; there is not a single dharma not manifested by it, and this demonstrates its non-empty aspect. Therefore, we describe the Tathāgatagarbha as neither empty nor un-empty; yet empty and non-empty at the same time.

5.3. The nature of the Tathāgatagarbha embodies the aspect of emptiness; it is empty and without a form. However, it also possesses a non-empty aspect by storing the seeds of myriad dharmas, enabling it to give birth to them. Thus, it encompasses both empty and non-empty nature.

When we awaken to its nature, our practice and study should encompass two aspects: its pure and unconditioned, non-empty essence, and its pure and untainted, conditioned meritorious virtue essence. Only then can we allow the great wisdom within us to arise, which subsequently leads to Non-discriminating Wisdom and eventually to Bodhisattva Path Wisdom. This progression allows us to enter the family of the Tathāgatas and continue advancing on the path toward Buddhahood. All of this hinges on practicing and studying its non-empty aspect and the seeds it possesses and stores; this holistic understanding and practice form the Essence of Mastery in Yogācāra teachings—Yogācāra-adhipatiśikṣāḥ.

We can only cognize and attain the existence of the Tathāgatagarbha through the conscious mind, for the

Tathāgatagarbha cannot cognize itself; it does not possess this functioning. But even if it could, it remains beyond the cognition of the mano-vijñāna and mano-āyatana.

All cultivation of practice and cognition primarily relies on the conscious mind. Without it, we cannot differentiate, make decisions or engage in practice, and when it does not operate, we may be in a state of near-death, or immersed in a state of absorptive samādhi without perception—Asaṃjñi-samāpatti, or entering the Cessation of Consciousness Samādhi—Nirodha-samāpatti. Alternatively, we could be in a coma-like state.

Awakening entails recognizing the Tathāgatagarbha, understanding where it resides, how it functions, how it transforms and gives rise to various dharmas, and how it interacts and coordinates with the operations of the seven consciousnesses. The Sixth Patriarch Huineng, after awakening, exclaimed "Who could have expected that one's essence and original self could be pure? Who could have expected that one's essence could be free from arising and ceasing? Who could have expected that one's essence could be complete in itself? Who could have expected that one's essence could be changeless and immovable? Who could have expected that one's essence can produce myriad dharmas?"

These five "who could have expected" statements reflect the profound realization of Huineng, who had completely and authentically attained and verified his Tathāgatagarbha. As for others who have attained and verified their Tathāgatagarbha, though perhaps not to the same depth as Huineng, can still grasp the overall functioning aspects of the Tathāgatagarbha. Otherwise, their awakening remains at the level of comprehension rather than true realization.

5.4. The Becoming in Thusness.

All Mahayana scriptures emphasize the existence of "Becoming"—Bhava. This Becoming is Thusness, or Tathāgatagarbha, the root of practicing and verifying the Buddhadharma. Without it, no dharma can arise. It is the foundation for the existence of myriad dharmas, underscoring its essential importance.

Myriad Buddhist scriptures teach and expound upon the principle of the Becoming. Departing from it in discussions and teachings of the Buddhadharma leads to teachings that are considered heretical—tīrthika. What fundamentally distinguishes us from heretics is our acceptance and realization of the Thusness and the Buddha-nature. Non-Buddhist heretics do not believe in or aspire to attain the Becoming; their philosophies often revolve around the nihilistic emptiness or a void devoid of any dharma. In contrast, the Buddhadharma asserts the existence of all dharmas dependent on Thusness and that without it, no dharma exists.

The twelve links of dependent origination also rely on the Becoming. Without it, the teaching cannot be established. Departing from the essence of Thusness to discussing Emptiness is nothing but mental proliferation. Pratyekabuddhas practice the teaching of the twelve links of dependent origination; they push on the origin of birth and death and when they reach "Becoming," they hit a dead end. The Buddha said, "I tried to look to the root of birth and death, but when I reached consciousness [manas-vijñāna] from name-and-form [nāmarūpa], I realized it reverses to name-and-form and there is no going forward..." Therefore, we know that no dharma can be produced and exist in the absence of the Tathāgatagarbha; no dharma can cross beyond it. The Buddha came to this conclusion: "consciousness causes name-and-form; name-and-form causes consciousness." Accordingly, it indicates that the birth and death of the five skandhas-body and the name-and-form are born out of the Tathāgatagarbha and they depend on it for their existence.

Ignorance causes volitional formations, indicating that there will be no formations of body, speech and mind in the absence of ignorance. Yet, whether it is ignorance or the formations of body, speech and mind, they will not exist without Thusness. Departing from it, there will be no ignorance, nor will there be any sentient beings and their formations of body, speech and mind. Body conceives from formlessness, meaning it is impregnated from the formlessness of the Tathāgatagarbha, not from nothingness. It is impossible for a body to come from nowhere; within it lies the origin of life. Ignoring this fact, let alone impregnation, there will be no life to be born.

The four noble truths practiced by Śrāvaka fundamentally rely on Becoming as well; otherwise, they lead to mere mental proliferation. Suffering, the first noble truth, originates from causes, which guide practitioners on the path toward the cessation of suffering—this process is rooted in the Tathāgatagarbha. Arhats, having attained liberation, adhere to the Buddha's teachings on the reliance of birth and death—bhavāśraya—believing that something inextinguishable remains after passing away. They understand that entering Nirvāṇa is not an extinction but rather a means to realize Arhatship, for only in the nirvanic state of full extinction of existence can the self be severed. This belief empowers them to renounce their existence completely upon attaining Arhatship.

During the Buddha's lifetime, he addressed those who propagated the Annihilationist Doctrine, which posits that nothing remains after Nirvāṇa. The Buddha corrected this view, emphasizing faith and belief in the reliance of birth and death interconnected with the non-ceasing Tathāgatagarbha.

Comprehending the truth of Thusness is crucial for contemporary practitioners, yet many lack clarity and deep understanding on its empty and non-empty aspects. Without comprehending these distinctions, it is impossible to authentically verify Thusness. Misunderstandings can easily lead to disparaging comments when discussing Thusness, which undermines the integrity of their practice and may result in serious karmic consequences.

To verify Thusness is to express clearly the formless essence of the Tathāgatagarbha. Without this verification, one might mistakenly equate formlessness with nothingness, leading to the misconception that discussions on Becoming involve grasping onto form and non-emptiness. Such a mistaken view reflects a serious misunderstanding where practitioners might lean towards views akin to nihilistic emptiness and rejecting the empty and non-empty aspects of Emptiness.

Understanding and expounding the principle of Thusness with clarity and precision requires one to encompass its non-empty aspect, its manifestation of all dharmas and its storing of karmic seeds' aspects, demonstrating a mark of great wisdom. Denying the

existence of Tathāgatagarbha is akin to rejecting the essence of Thusness itself, falling into the trap of doctrine of nihilistic emptiness. False dharma cannot manifest true functionings and true virtues, unlike Thusness, which truly contains infinite seeds and possesses boundless virtues. Hence, it is affirmed as true, not false.

For Bodhisattvas, awakening leads to a gradual comprehension of the functioning of Tathāgatagarbha's seeds, which in turn increases their wisdom gradually. Upon fully attaining the functioning of all seeds, they reach the stage of Omniscient Wisdom —Sarvathājñāna, a stage attained only by Buddhas.

All dharmas and all forms brought forth by the Tathāgatagarbha are nothing but phenomena of illusory bubbles and shadow. However, Thusness is not; it is the true Becoming—only real Dharma can be verified and attained. Understanding this principle is crucial for verifying Thusness and ultimately attaining awakening.

In contrast, pursuing phenomena that lead only to nothingness or voidness without understanding their relationship to Thusness is futile. It's likened to peeling layers off a banana tree, only to find nothing substantial at the core—an empty pursuit that leads to nothing. Pursuing and verifying Thusness on the other hand, can lead to the attainment of infinite wisdom and eventually to Buddhahood.

The Buddha cautions Bodhisattvas to pursue the type of emptiness attained by the Arhats, urging them not to extinguish all dharmas but to make good use of it. The Bodhisattva Path is a path of self-benefiting and altruism for the well-being of all sentient beings. Their practice is deeply rooted in Thusness; they first pursue verifying and attaining, then they awaken and attain the Thusness. Later, they rely and rest on Thusness to practice and realize themselves for the path of Buddhahood. In summary, both Buddhadharma and mundane dharmas rely on Thusness to exist; the teaching of Thusness is incredibly profound and arduous to fathom. If one is not yet verified, one shall be mindful of constructing karma from incorrect speech. Don't mistake knowledge and opinion as a conclusion. Take heed!

5.5. The Bhagavan spoke of the concept of empty space—ākāśa—in the *Shurangama Sutra*, describing it as void and empty. A place without form—rūpa—is called an empty space. Empty space is also referred to as form at the edge of form—rūpa-paryanta-rūpa; it is a formless form, and its nature is illusory, manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha, contained within it, and inherently the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha. In actuality, nothing within it constitutes empty space; conversely, it ceases to be empty space if it contains even the tiniest dot of something.

True Emptiness and Wondrous Becoming (眞空妙有, zhēnkōng miàoyǒu; J. shinkū myōu)—[a term coined by Chinese Mahayana schools, derived from both Madhyamaka and Yogācāra teachings]—describe the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha. The Tathāgatagarbha is without a single dharma, embodying true emptiness, yet it contains the seeds of myriad dharmas, capable of manifesting all phenomena—this is Wondrous Becoming. The combination of these two aspects forms the complete essence of the Tathāgatagarbha, whereas empty space lacks this nature of meritorious virtue.

6. Neither one nor different

Neither one nor different refers to the relationship between the Tathāgatagarbha and myriad dharmas and the two are neither unified nor distinct entities. Myriad dharmas, all produced by the Tathāgatagarbha, include all dharmas in the three realms of existence, the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena. In this context, the relationship between the Tathāgatagarbha and the five skandhas, the twelve sense bases and the eighteen realms of phenomena is neither one nor different. If they were unified, then when they cease, the Tathāgatagarbha would also cease. In reality, they have arisen and ceased innumerable times since beginningless time, yet the Tathāgatagarbha never ceases, remaining the same primordial essence. This indicates that the two are not unified. However, it would be incorrect to assert that since they are not unified, they must be completely separate entities with no connection or shared nature; in reality, the five skandhas do not

possess an inherent dominant nature and cannot independently rely on or dominate themselves.

The five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena rely on the seeds provided by the Tathāgatagarbha to sustain themselves in every kṣaṇa, much like a water pump continuously supplying water. If the two were not one but different, when life ends and the Tathāgatagarbha leaves the body, the sentient being would be able to continue living. This is impossible. The relationship between the two is akin to that of a fetus and its mother—they are neither one entity nor completely separate entities. If they were one entity, when the fetus dies, the mother would also die; if they were two entities, when the mother dies, the fetus could continue its life. This clearly shows that they are neither completely unified nor entirely separate.

The Tathāgatagarbha is likened to the boundless, vast ocean, while myriad dharmas are like the foams on its surface. The foams manifest and disappear, but the ocean remains unchanged. Without the ocean, there would be no foams. This illustrates that the two are neither one unified entity nor completely separate entities and that their relationship is neither one nor different.

7. Neither breaking nor changing

7.1. The nature of non-breaking in the Tathāgatagarbha refers to its uninterrupted existence—it has never been cut off or ceased. It has existed since beginningless time and will continue to exist without end in the future. It is beginningless, endless and perpetual.

The nature of non-changing refers to the Tathāgatagarbha itself. It relies on its consciousness seeds to permanently produce, creating an uninterrupted, never-ceasing primordial essence that enables all functionings to manifest. At the same time, its consciousness seeds arise and cease, rendering it impermanent. Despite this, the functionings of the essence will never cease—even in the nirvanic state of full extinction of existence its essence continues to operate, streaming and producing endlessly, perpetually sustaining itself.

Another definitive meaning of the nature of non-changing is that the primordial essence stores defiled seeds of the seven consciousnesses, resulting in continuous transformations within those seeds. To study and practice the Buddha Way is to purify these defiled seeds and transform them into pure ones. The ever-changing karmic seeds of the seven consciousnesses lead to an ongoing process of change and transmutation, shifting from impure to pure and vice versa—never remaining permanently unchanged. As a result, the Tathāgatagarbha is in a state of flux. Only when one attains Buddhahood and fully purifies one's karmic seeds will the seeds within the Tathāgatagarbha cease transmuting, and at that point, the content of its primordial essence will stabilize, becoming the true, permanent amala-vijñāna.

7.2 The Zendo has no Zen nor does it have the Way; it neither discusses Zen nor speaks of the Way. It is non-empty, non-becoming, non-breaking and non-changing; it does not establish the two sides and lacks the middle.

Non-breaking and non-changing refer to sentient beings' Tathāgatagarbha. Its primordial nature is permanent and immutable, yet the seeds within it arise, cease and transmute. Furthermore, it perpetually delivers its own consciousness seeds, arising and ceasing kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa. In this state, it maintains a non-arising, non-ceasing, yet permanent and enduring primordial essence.

8. Neither true nor false

The Tathāgatagarbha, regarded as the true mind and the Dharma Realm True Reality, authentically exists as the real primordial essence. However, the primordial essence stores the ceasing and arising karmic seeds generated from the seven consciousnesses and the seeds of illusory dharmas. Because of this, it perpetually produces both arising and ceasing, as well as illusory dharmas. Due to its storage of these ceasing, arising and transmuting seeds of conditioned dharmas, it partakes in the nature of these dharmas, thereby possessing a non-true, non-false nature.

If we were to say it is true, the presence of illusory dharmas seeds from the seven consciousnesses stored within would not make it entirely real. Conversely, if we were to say it is false, its self-nature truly exists and possesses a real functional nature. Therefore, the Tathāgatagarbha possesses a nature that is non-true, non-false, and also true and false.

This concludes the Tathāgatagarbha's nature as the Middle Way. This nature is fundamentally different from the so-called "middle way" in heretical doctrines. In Buddhadharma, the Middle Way refers specifically to the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, which contains both eight types and countless forms of non-Middle Way natures. It encompasses every state of neither this nor that, neither these nor those, transcending both extremes and not abiding in the middle. To speak of the Middle Way without the Tathāgatagarbha is to refer to the middle way of heretical doctrines—dharmas outside of the mind. The mundane "middle way" is merely one side, cycling between the extremes of arising and ceasing. Failing to abandon these extremes results in a one-sided view, which is ultimately a wrong view, and not the Middle Way of Buddhadharma.

Some believe that when heaven, earth, myriad things and people are in harmony, it represents the "Golden Middle Way." However, this is an arising and ceasing dharma. If there is arising and ceasing, it is not the true Middle Way, as it remains within the realm of extremes and thus belongs to dharmas of sides. The Middle Way we speak of transcends mundane dharmas such as arising and ceasing, dark and light, empty and non-empty, coming and going, defiled and pure, non-breaking and non-changing. It departs from both opposition and unity. It is neither a hybrid nor a fusion, nor is it an embodiment of the unity of opposites.

Some claim that calmness itself is the Middle Way. However, calmness is merely a state in which the mano-vijñāna resides, making it a dualistic dharma. The conscious mind fluctuates between being calm and not calm—these two states cannot coexist simultaneously. Therefore, calmness is not the Middle Way.

A single dose of anesthesia can disrupt calmness; a severe accident can shatter it; and at the moment of death, as the Buddha describes, "the four elements breaking down like a turtle being

forcefully removed from its shell, causing excruciating pain." In such moments, there is no calmness, and no meditative equipoise—samāpatti—in which the body and mind rest in tranquil composure. Even a minor disturbance can prevent the mind from maintaining calmness.

Regardless of how free-spirited, at ease or elegant one may appear in life, such qualities are nothing more than arising and ceasing dharmas—mere affairs within the samsara of birth and death. Those with intense sentiments and cravings often dwell in the three lower realms. Many poets and artists of the past are said to reside in the realm of hungry ghosts due to their accumulation of strong craving karmic seeds. In the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha says, "When desires are many and thoughts are few, one falls into a state akin to that of animals; when the seven emotions and three types of thoughts dominate, one sinks into the realm of hungry ghosts; when the nine emotions and one type of thought persist, one descends into the realm of hell." In this respect, if one has attachments, cravings and clings to them, it perpetuates not the Middle Way but the cycle of samsara.

Departing from Thusness to speak of the Middle Way represents both one-sided and erroneous views; these are mundane dharmas and do not involve supramundane dharma. The nature of the Middle Way that the Tathāgatagarbha embodies is neither within the mundane world nor outside of it; it neither arises nor ceases; it does not cling to either side nor remain in the middle; even if there were a middle, it would still be a side. The true Middle Way transcends the concepts of middle and side; it does not adhere to any single dharma. Speaking of calmness, ease, or freedom implies the existence of an opposite side. However, within these states, there exists a Middle Way that transcends all sides. Ordinary people are unable to experience this true Middle Way because they only perceive the illusory appearance of calmness and do not see the formless Middle Way of the Tathāgatagarbha that transcends both perceiving and experiencing calmness.

Thus, any form of one-sided or erroneous view is a manifestation of the Tathāgatagarbha, within which the nature of the Middle Way is constantly operating. In this context, a one-sided

view or wrong view is, in essence, a right view. Within the Tathāgatagarbha, the absence of the right view implies the absence of the wrong view, and the absence of the Middle Way implies the absence of the one-sided view. Therefore, all views are right views; all forms are forms of Buddhas; all sounds are sounds of Buddhas; all smells are smells of Buddhas; all tastes are tastes of Buddhas; all contacts are contacts of Buddhas; all dharmas are the Buddhadharma. Thus, the path to liberation exists within all dharmas, right in this present moment. One needs wisdom to discern it for themselves.

Chapter 3:
The Tathāgatagarbha Are Not Shared

1.

Although the Tathāgatagarbha is all-pervading, it is not shared among sentient beings. Instead, each individual has their own Tathāgatagarbha and their unique eight consciousnesses; they do not mix, or the principle of causes and conditions and the karmic fruits would be in chaos. Each individual's karmic seeds from infinite kalpas are stored in their Tathāgatagarbha. If this were not the case, when a karmic seed ripened, which individual would receive the fruit of karma? It would be unfair if Mushin cultivates wholesome deeds in this lifetime and Yushin, in her next lifetime, receives all the good karmic seeds Mushin cultivated. Therefore, it is a fundamental truth that each individual has their unique Tathāgatagarbha and each Tathāgatagarbha can only accompany one five skandhas that it created, and tend to its own affairs accordingly.

The Tathāgatagarbha possesses the inherent functioning of maintaining the body by means of accompanying the five skandhas, which provide the individual with the elements of life—jīvitaṃ, warmth—ūṣman—and consciousness—vijñāna. Otherwise, the body would cease to function and become a corpse.

If the Tathāgatagarbha were shared, it would be impossible for it to simultaneously maintain the five skandhas of all sentient beings. When it is present within one individual's five-skandha body, it could not be in another's. If it were truly shared, where would it reside? If it existed in empty space, it would have no direct relationship with any sentient being and would be unable to sustain the five skandhas-body or give rise to the functions of the five skandhas. Furthermore, if the true mind were shared, when one

individual attains Buddhahood, all beings would automatically attain Buddhahood without needing to engage in their own practices. This raises an important question: there are countless Buddhas in the ten directions, so why are we still bound to suffering, experiencing the phenomena of arising and ceasing? Why would we still need to practice?

There are infinite Buddha-realms across the ten directions, each containing a three-thousandfold universe—trisahasra-mahāsahasra-lokadhātu—governed by one Buddha. When a Bodhisattva attains Buddhahood, their Buddha-realm manifests a three-thousandfold universe, and they guide and help the sentient beings with whom they share karmic affinities. Infinite Buddhas mean infinite Buddha-realms, and each Buddha-realm is a manifestation of that Buddha's Thusness, connected with the Tathāgatagarbha of the sentient beings who share those karmic affinities.

Although each Tathāgatagarbha fulfills the karmic fruits for the five skandhas-body it produces, each of them must also fulfill the collective karmic fruits of all sentient beings. Collective karma refers to the karma created by a group of sentient beings, where the karmic seeds are stored within each individual's Tathāgatagarbha. When the conditions for this collective karma ripen, they collectively experience the same karmic fruit. For instance, a group of people fishing in a river unknowingly creates the karma of killing, and the karmic seeds from this act are stored in each of their Tathāgatagarbha. When these fish are reborn in the human realm, they may engage in acts of killing with those who previously killed them, resulting in a collective karmic fruit directly experienced by those individuals

2.

Some assert that "sentient beings share one Dharmakāya and benefit from a single Tathāgatagarbha," but this is an erroneous view of the equality of the Dharmakāya. The "one Dharmakāya" in sentient beings refers to the equality of their Tathāgatagarbha's nature. This means that each Tathāgatagarbha shares the same

functionings and characteristics, possessing the same qualities as the primordial essence of Buddhas: a pure nature, undefiled and unstained by the six sensory realms. It manifests all dharmas impartially, without discrimination between good and bad, right and wrong, beautiful and ugly, or forms such as male and female.

Although the essence of the Tathāgatagarbha in both sentient beings and Buddhas is equal, it does not escape the phenomenon of inequality. Each individual carries their own karma and affinities, resulting in distinct karmic fruits. If different karmic actions and seeds led to identical outcomes, it would not represent true sameness; rather, the sameness that manifests through unequal phenomena reveals the Tathāgatagarbha's true impartial nature. This impartiality is reflected in how it manifests the karmic fruits of the five skandhas without preference, embodying the impartiality of Thusness. All unequal phenomena arise from the principle of sameness, and thus, it is called "equality without difference," where form and Thusness are unified.

3.

Each individual's Tathāgatagarbha tends to their five skandhas' affairs and the eighteen realms of phenomena, fulfilling their own causes and conditions and being responsible for recording their own mental formations of body, speech and mind. They do not produce or store other people's karmic seeds. The Tathāgatagarbha, known for its equal awareness, is characterized by sameness, Thusness and impartiality. It has no partial mental formations and lacks discriminating features. This is a very simple principle, and if one comprehends the meaning of Dharma more thoroughly, one would be able to correspond and resonate with the truth.

Each Buddha, during their foundational stages, due to their individual Tathāgatagarbha, was able to make their own Bodhisattva vows, practice in their unique way, and experience various phenomena according to their karmic seeds and affinities. As a result, upon attaining Buddhahood, they manifested their own distinct Buddha-realm, leading to different disciples, varying samsaric lives, and diverse lifespans. All of this is governed and

manifested by the causes and conditions arising from each individual Tathāgatagarbha.

The Tathāgatagarbha is the Dharmakāya, in which it is the amala-vijñāna in Buddha-realm. It is Thusness and the Great Mirror Wisdom. One Buddha, one Dharmakāya, contains and stores their own wholesome karmic seeds and shares with no one.

One might ask why the Tathāgatagarbha is not shared among all sentient beings. According to Yogācāra scriptures, the Tathāgatagarbha's consciousness seeds stream out and form the seven consciousnesses. When these seven consciousnesses carry out their respective functions, the resulting consciousness seeds return to their own Tathāgatagarbha. This process ensures that each individual's actions—whether through body, speech or mind—are stored as karmic seeds within their Tathāgatagarbha. When conditions ripen, these seeds generate specific karmic fruits for the individual. Thus, the Tathāgatagarbha operates independently for each sentient being, preserving the integrity of individual karma and ensuring that karmic outcomes are precise and just.

From this, we can understand that each Tathāgatagarbha generates its own seven consciousnesses and is solely responsible for coordinating, recording, storing, and fulfilling its own karmic fruits. If this were not the case, the law of causes and conditions would be disrupted, leading to chaos in the mundane world with erratic causes and conditions, making it impossible for practitioners of the Buddha Way to benefit from their wholesome karmic rewards.

4.

Each individual's Tathāgatagarbha oversees the karmic fruits that they have accumulated, ensuring that when these karmic seeds ripen, they manifest accordingly. As one practices the Buddha Way, they gradually purify and transform the karmic seeds stored within their own Tathāgatagarbha. Only through this personal purification can one attain Buddhahood. No one else's Tathāgatagarbha can perform this task, nor can one achieve Buddhahood through another's purification of karmic seeds. If this were the case, when one becomes a Buddha, countless sentient beings across the ten

directions would also attain Buddhahood simultaneously. Such an outward-karmic-benefiting phenomenon does not exist!

Across the ten directions, innumerable Buddhas guide and liberate countless sentient beings from the suffering of birth and death. However, the question of how and when each individual can attain liberation and escape the cycle of samsara, ensuring no one is left behind, remains. For this reason, the Buddha urges Bodhisattva Mahasattvas to make the ten boundless great vows to save infinite sentient beings throughout endless future kalpas. Thus, it is said that one can only feed one's own stomach, create one's own karma, practice one's own path, and attain one's own Buddhahood.

5.

Some argue that the ālaya-vijñāna is universally shared, suggesting that one could take something from another's ālaya-vijñāna and vice versa. This assertion is misguided. If Devadatta engages in negative actions and Shugyo attempts to extract those negative karmic seeds from his ālaya-vijñāna, she would inevitably experience the negative karmic consequences herself. Conversely, if Devadatta cultivates wholesome deeds and Shugyo takes those wholesome karmic seeds and incorporates them into her own ālaya-vijñāna, she would then benefit from the positive karmic outcomes. Under these circumstances, does this concept seem plausible? Would anyone truly wish to share their ālaya-vijñāna?

Furthermore, if we were to share the same ālaya-vijñāna with all Buddhas—endowed with their unsurpassed great wisdom, infinite meritorious virtues, and virtuous capabilities—could we then assimilate these qualities for ourselves? If such a scenario were possible, there would be no need to practice; one could simply absorb a Buddha's amala-vijñāna and attain Buddhahood instantly. Consequently, there would be no sentient beings in the ten directions, no suffering in the three lower realms, and the six realms of cyclic existence would cease to exist.

One must consider why, despite the existence of countless Buddhas across the ten directions, sentient beings continue to suffer. The answer lies in the fact that many people speculate based

on their imagination, carelessly invent their own interpretations of the Buddhadharma, and misinterpret the causes and conditions. Such misguided views and speculations lead only to self-harm and the harming of others.

6.

After an individual's ālaya-vijñāna undergoes three great Asamkhyeya kalpas of practice, the ignorance in their seven consciousnesses is completely extinguished, leading to a final transformation of consciousness into wisdom. The seventh consciousness transforms into the Wisdom of Equality—Samatājñāna; the sixth consciousness transforms into the Wisdom of Profound Insight—Pratyavekṣaṇājñāna; the first five consciousnesses transform into the Wisdom of Perfect Conduct—Kṛtyānuṣṭhānajñāna; and the eighth consciousness transforms into the Great Mirror Wisdom—Ādarśajñāna, which perfectly illuminates all dharmas. At this stage, the defiled karmic seeds from the seven consciousnesses no longer obscure or limit the Tathāgatagarbha. Collectively, the eight consciousnesses attain Buddhahood, signifying the individual's completion of the three great Asamkhyeya kalpas' path to Buddhahood, and they become the Honored One of the three realms of existence beyond learning.

In contrast, sentient beings who have not yet attained Buddhahood still have their eighth consciousness in the form of ālaya-vijñāna, which has not yet transformed into the Great Mirror Wisdom. Their eighth consciousness continues to store the defiled seeds from their seven consciousnesses, and their wisdom and virtuous capabilities remain obscured and limited by these seeds, preventing a perfect illumination on all dharmas.

This distinction underscores why we assert that the eighth consciousness is not shared. Each individual possesses their own eighth consciousness, which differs in name and functioning from that of Buddhas. A Buddha's eighth consciousness contains twenty-one mental factors: five universal, five particular and eleven wholesome, whereas a sentient being's eighth consciousness contains only five universal mental factors. This stark difference

highlights that the eighth consciousness of sentient beings is not equivalent to the Great Mirror Wisdom, or amala-vijñāna, possessed by Buddhas.

Chapter 4:
Differentiating and Non-Differentiating Nature

1.

The non-differentiating nature of the Tathāgatagarbha means it does not distinguish between the myriad dharmas of the six sensory realms in the three realms of existence. Despite its constant maintenance and transformation, the Tathāgatagarbha functions like a machine, differentiating only karmic seeds, creating and manifesting myriad dharmas without perceiving their actual contents.

A saying encapsulates this nature: "Thusness is neither thought nor non-thought." This implies that there is neither sensation nor non-sensation, neither mental formations nor non-mental formations. The Tathāgatagarbha does not sense the sensory realms and is devoid of perception and mental formations regarding them.

Although thoughts, perceptions and mental formations belong to the five skandhas and seven consciousnesses, it is the Tathāgatagarbha that ultimately creates, maintains and transforms all dharmas. Thusness, despite having no thought, produces all mundane dharmas, including the six sensory realms. It does not perceive suffering and joy, good and bad, yet it receives and manifests all dharmas with equanimity; it also has no mental formations, yet it manifests, maintains and transforms all dharmas.

The differentiating nature of the Tathāgatagarbha refers to its capacity to distinguish based on a sentient being's seven consciousness-minds, karmic seeds, and their "rebirth body—sendriya kāya—and dependent living environment—paratantra-bhājana-loka." It is fully aware of all activities of the seven consciousnesses—calculating, thinking, and deciding. Through this differentiation, it generates consciousness seeds for the seven consciousnesses and coordinates with them to manifest various

dharmas. Its ability to distinguish among karmic seeds enables it to create the rebirth body and the dependent living environment, forming the dwelling place—the resultant physical world—for the five-skandhas body. By aligning with these karmic seeds, it determines the type and shape of a form-body to manifest, its features, the timing of its emergence, and when it will cease to exist.

Its non-differentiating nature reflects its inherent non-attachment. Whether one's five skandhas-body performs wholesome or unwholesome deeds, it responds accordingly; whether one ascends to the deva realm or descends to the hell realm, it follows suit—yet it does not go. It accompanies the five skandhas-body wherever it goes and conforms to karmic conditions without change. In this unchanged state, it abides by the karmic conditions.

Whether a five skandhas-body seeks Buddhahood or remains in an illusory existence, it produces the necessary karmic seeds without discrimination. This is because it is a consciousness and thus possesses the intrinsic nature of consciousness and cognition. However, it does not know the six sensory realms but rather the karmic seeds and mental formations of the seven consciousness-minds. Its cognition differs from that of the seven consciousness-minds; one can gradually discern these differences after awakening to their true mind.

The Tathāgatagarbha, while not differentiating the six sensory realms, coordinates with the seven consciousness-minds to bring about differentiation. It creates a sentient being by differentiating their karmic seeds stored within, accurately producing both the fruition of the body and the environment in which the body dwells. It also differentiates the mental formations of the seven consciousness-minds and delivers consciousness seeds and karmic seeds for their functioning.

2.

[Quote from the *Avatamsaka Sutra*] *"Myriad dharmas encompass both quiescent extinction and non-quiescent extinction, transcending the dichotomy of discrimination. Understand that all discrimination are*

mundane views; once one attains the final fruition [of Arahatship], the discriminating mind ceases."

The seven consciousnesses differentiate the Tathāgatagarbha as either quiescent extinction or non-quiescent extinction. This discriminating function should not be mistaken for the self-nature of the true mind, or we risk being trapped in the cycle of samsara. The mind that differentiates is collectively the false mind of the seven consciousnesses. When we attain the absolute truth of the Tathāgatagarbha, we realize that it does not differentiate the mundane dharmas of the five skandhas, nor does it differentiate the six sensory realms. This discriminating function belongs to the seven consciousness-minds and pertains only to the mundane dharmas within the three realms of existence.

When an Arhat transcends the three realms of existence by cutting off the appropriating nature of their mano-āyatana towards mundane dharmas, it signifies the realization of the final stage of Arhatship—Anupādisesa-nibbānadhātu, the full extinction of existence. In this nirvanic state, the five skandhas and seven consciousnesses are completely extinguished, indicating that their differentiating nature is also extinguished, leaving only the awareness-less and cognition-less state of the Tathāgatagarbha.

This form of quiescent extinction is ineffable; the Tathāgatagarbha, possessing all dharmas, encompasses formlessness, voicelessness, expressionlessness, thoughtlessness, neither going nor coming and devoid of mental formations. Its primordial essence is quiescent extinction and its form is empty. Because it is ineffable, Buddhas and Bodhisattvas can only use language to lightly express its essence. They use words as a finger pointing to the moon, guiding sentient beings to follow this finger to discover their primordial essence—the true moon. Since Buddhas and Bodhisattvas cannot fully expound its primordial essence, anything said is merely a finger pointing towards the moon.

3.

The seven great seeds inherent in each ālaya-vijñāna, along with the karmic seeds it stores, enable it to cognize the rebirth body and

the dependent living environment. It recognizes when and how these karmic seeds ripen. For example, when karmic conditions are met, the ālaya-vijñāna delivers the seven great seeds to create the five skandhas-body according to these seeds. Once this is done, it maintains detailed awareness of the five skandhas, constantly accompanying and sustaining the body by delivering and transforming seeds for its continuous existence, development and change.

The resultant physical world, where countless sentient beings dwell, is collectively created by their individual ālaya-vijñānas. Each ālaya-vijñāna cognizes the karmic seeds of its own resultant physical world. As a result, each ālaya-vijñāna delivers the great four seeds to form the physical universe and subsequently co-maintains and upholds it with other ālaya-vijñānas, enabling the physical universe to manifest phenomena of arising, dwelling, changing and ceasing.

Because the ālaya-vijñāna can cognize the rebirth body and the dependent living environment, it creates with precision, following the law of causes and conditions rather than acting randomly. Even after the creation of a rebirth body, the ālaya-vijñāna continues to cognize the body to make necessary adjustments. This process has been ongoing since time immemorial. Unlike the mano-vijñāna, which names and categorizes dharmas, the ālaya-vijñāna functions like a machine, carrying out its operations without awareness of the specific contents or actions involved.

The ālaya-vijñāna lacks the analytical, contemplative and judgmental characteristics that the mano-vijñāna possesses. It processes the four great elements derived from the food a sentient being consumes and transforms them into the body, knowing precisely how much to use and how to effect the transformation. Despite similar dietary intake and environmental conditions, the physical bodies of different sentient beings vary due to the influence of karmic forces on how their ālaya-vijñānas transform their bodies.

4.

As a form of consciousness, the Tathāgatagarbha has its own unique cognitive characteristic. It cognizes karmic seeds and creates a rebirth body and their dependent living environment in accordance with them. Although it cognizes all phenomena except the six sensory realms, it does not recognize specific names or forms —this function belongs solely to the seven consciousnesses.

By streaming out the consciousness seeds for the seven consciousnesses, it brings them into manifestation; by streaming out the four great seeds of fire, wind, water and earth, it manifests the rebirth body and the dependent living environment. Once it has cognized an individual's mental formations, the Tathāgatagarbha coordinates with their seven consciousnesses and five skandhas to manifest the necessary dharmas. Without this cognitive functioning, it would be unable to fulfill karmic fruit, thus unable to manifest the living environment for the five skandhas-body and the physical universe.

This process follows a specific order: first, delivering the four great seeds, then forming the body, followed by the living environment, and finally, the physical universe. The intricate details of this differentiating nature can only be fully understood and observed after one has awakened. Those who have not yet awakened remain unable to perceive it.

5.

The Tathāgatagarbha uses its five universal mental factors to cognize. These mental factors operate continuously, without pause. First, it directs attention (the mental factor of manaskāra) to the karmic seeds, the rebirth body and the dependent living environment. Then it makes contact (sparśa), accepts (vedanā), cognizes and imprints their forms—this is the role of the mental factor of perception (saṃjñā). Following this, the mental factor of volition (cetanā) arises, making decisions. Finally, it delivers the seven great seeds along with the corresponding karmic seeds, initiating the manifestation and functioning of myriad dharmas.

This process reflects the Tathāgatagarbha's differentiating nature. For instance, when creating a fetus, it knows how and where to generate the necessary tissues, organs, shapes and colors. Similarly, when transforming a sentient being's physical body, it differentiates the body, karmic seeds and karmic conditions to alter the body accordingly—resulting in changes from slim to corpulent, healthy to ill, or even death. None of these transformations are fixed; they depend entirely on the changing of karmic seeds.

The way the Tathāgatagarbha differentiates is different from that of the manas- and mano-vijñāna. It perceives all forms without attachment, emotional filtering or preference, functioning like a pure reflection in a mirror—operating mechanically, without a discriminating mind.

In contrast, when the seven consciousnesses differentiate, phenomena manifest in the mind, but not in the same way as the Tathāgatagarbha's pure reflection. The five consciousnesses—eye, ear, nose, tongue and body—possess the mental formation of craving (lobha), leading to gross sensations of pain and joy, likes and dislikes. For example, the eye-consciousness will keep engaging with a color it finds pleasing. When encountering something painful, it instinctively avoids it—this is aversion (pratigha), a mental formation. Both manas- and mano-vijñāna also possess mental formations like greed and aversion.

However, the Tathāgatagarbha is free from craving and aversion. It neither grasps nor avoids; it simply follows the law of nature, continuously operating until karmic seeds are fully actualized.

6.

We previously mentioned that the Tathāgatagarbha is a consciousness, and as such, it possesses unique cognitive characteristics. For example, it knows the existence of the six sensory realms but does not know their specific forms. It recognizes karmic seeds and the mental formations of the seven

consciousnesses and has many cognitive functionings distinct from those of the seven consciousness-minds.

In addition to this, the Tathāgatagarbha has both conditioned and unconditioned functionings. Its conditioned functioning includes the continuous processes of storing, delivering, and coordinating with the mental activities of the five skandhas, as well as delivering the karmic seeds of the seven consciousnesses and manifesting myriad dharmas. The karmic seeds, unlike consciousness seeds, are not themselves forms of consciousness and therefore lack cognition; rather, they are objects being cognized and processed by the Tathāgatagarbha.

The primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha also possesses a cognitive nature, relying on its mental factors to cognize. Similarly, the seven consciousnesses depend on their mental factors to function. However, before the seven consciousnesses can cognize, they require the Tathāgatagarbha to deliver consciousness seeds that activate their mental factors, enabling them to perceive and differentiate myriad dharmas within the six sensory realms.

The Tathāgatagarbha has its own stream of consciousness seeds. Even in the nirvanic state of full extinction that Arhats enter, its consciousness seeds continue to stream out. Myriad Buddhas spent three great Asamkhyeya kalpas in their practices, working to transform the ignorance of the seven false minds. Even if a Bodhisattva lacks understanding of a single dharma, ignorance persists. When this ignorance is fully extinguished, a Bodhisattva attains Omniscient Wisdom, comprehending all dharmas in both the mundane and supramundane worlds.

All dharmas depend on the Tathāgatagarbha. As such, the path to Buddhahood is a journey to fully comprehend and attain the Tathāgatagarbha by transforming the ignorance inherent in the seven consciousnesses. In other words, studying the principles, functionings and characteristics of the eighth consciousness, as well as the functions and characteristics of the seven consciousnesses, constitutes the right practice and is of utmost importance for practitioners.

7.

To understand how the Tathāgatagarbha cognizes a sentient being's mental formations without differentiating, first we must explore its dual nature—differentiating and non-differentiating.

The non-differentiating aspect of the Tathāgatagarbha reflects its inability to discern specific details or objects from the myriad dharmas within the six sensory realms. Differentiation within these realms is a function of the six consciousnesses, the six false minds. The Tathāgatagarbha does not engage in identifying the phenomena of the sensory realms, mundane dharmas, names or concepts. As such, it does not recognize or categorize them as good or bad. In this sense, we say the Tathāgatagarbha remains thought-free when encountering the phenomena of the six sensory realms, with a mind-ground free from the afflictions of greed, hatred and delusion.

However, the differentiating aspect of the Tathāgatagarbha refers to its ability to cognize a sentient being's mental formations, karmic seeds, the six sense faculties, the physical universe, the eighteen realms of a phenomena. Mental formations, in this context, refer to the mental factors accompanying the seven consciousness-minds. The Tathāgatagarbha first delivers the consciousness seeds, giving rise to the seven consciousnesses, whose activities then initiate the operation of their mental factors. Following this, the Tathāgatagarbha cognizes the mental processes and the content arising from the seven consciousnesses.

It aligns with the mental factors of attention and volition from the seven consciousnesses to bring forth myriad dharmas. As the seven consciousnesses operate, karma is produced, and the corresponding karmic seeds are delivered, stored and recorded. In this process, the Tathāgatagarbha never fails to record everything the seven consciousnesses do.

Moreover, the Tathāgatagarbha maintains and nurtures the sense faculties—eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body—along with the mind faculty—mano-āyatana. The physical form of the body is created by the Tathāgatagarbha according to karmic seeds, and it knows the past, present and future states of the body, operating within the law of causes and conditions.

Through the perceiving aspect of the Tathāgatagarbha—darśana-bhāga—the manas-vijñāna is able to perceive everything. For instance, if it perceives impending danger and identifies as the grasping "I," it, together with the six consciousnesses, will seek to protect the body. The Tathāgatagarbha then abides by this perception of the seven consciousnesses, changing and maintaining the five faculties of the body according to the karmic seeds.

The physical universe is collectively manifested by each Tathāgatagarbha of sentient beings according to their shared karma. Together, all Tathāgatagarbhas maintain the physical universe by cognizing and engaging in its cycles of formation, duration, decay and dissolution. Through this cognitive functioning, the Tathāgatagarbha perceives the past, present and future states of the physical universe. Once this cognition is complete, the mano-āyatana can learn its content, enabling those with keen faculties to sense premonitions and plan accordingly.

Although the Tathāgatagarbha cannot cognize the specific contents of the six sensory realms, it manifests and nurtures them. The seeds of these realms are stored within it, allowing it to cognize their past, present and future states. In simple terms, the Tathāgatagarbha manifests the sensory realms according to karmic seeds and maintains them without fully knowing what they are.

While it may appear that the mano-āyatana governs the mundane world and its dharmas, in truth, it is the Tathāgatagarbha that governs them. However, this governance is not based on intention or decision-making; the Tathāgatagarbha simply responds to the mano-āyatana and karmic seeds, manifesting the mundane world truthfully without holding any personal views or opinions, as it lacks the nature of a self.

With this analysis, we can better understand what the Tathāgatagarbha can and cannot differentiate. Upon realizing our Tathāgatagarbha, various forms of wisdom will develop, allowing us to gradually observe its intrinsic nature and characteristics from different perspectives. This confirms that attaining the Tathāgatagarbha is of utmost importance, and our initial practice should focus on realizing this essence.

8.

Whether we attempt to establish or reject its existence, the Tathāgatagarbha remains unchanged; no force can destroy it. It embodies the truthful Dharma Eye, perceiving all dharmas yet without truly seeing, knowing all dharmas yet without truly knowing, hearing all dharmas yet without truly hearing, and being aware of all dharmas yet without actual awareness. It is neither this nor that.

The mechanism by which the Tathāgatagarbha embodies the "neither this nor that" functioning lies in its great perceiving seed—darśana-mahābhūta-bīja—which gives rise to its "seeing" functioning, enabling it to perceive and bring forth all dharmas. This seed also gives rise to the nature-perceiving aspect of the seven consciousnesses. In summary, the Tathāgatagarbha's ability to perceive, create and manifest all dharmas according to karmic seeds is based on the outlines of dharmas it perceives. However, while the Tathāgatagarbha does not know the actual contents of all dharmas, the mano-āyatana understands some of these outlines and has a better understanding of their actual aspects than the Tathāgatagarbha.

9.

"Non-differentiating is wisdom; differentiating is consciousness." This saying signifies that thenālaya-vijñāna possesses innate wisdom and is the mind of great wisdom. Because it does not know the six sense bases—ṣaḍāyatana—it is unable to differentiate the six sensory realms, making it a consciousness of wisdom distinct from the nature of the seven consciousness-minds.

The seven transforming consciousnesses represent the differentiating nature of all seven consciousnesses; their primary functions are to cognize and discriminate within the six sensory realms, thus earning the designation "consciousness-minds." Mano-vijñāna has the strongest discriminating nature, while manas-vijñāna's discriminating capacity is weaker. Except in states of deep samādhi, self-extinction, sleep, coma or death, differentiation

continues as long as the seven consciousnesses persist in their functioning.

Although ālaya-vijñāna does not differentiate the six sensory realms, it has its own method of differentiation because it must continuously operate and manifest all dharmas within the three realms of existence. Before producing dharmas, it differentiates the karmic seeds upon which its functioning relies. By creating and sustaining the physical world and a sentient being's five skandhas-body, the ālaya-vijñāna demonstrates its capacity for differentiation. This differentiation is crucial for maintaining the phenomena of arising, dwelling, changing and ceasing, as well as birth, old age, sickness and death. In compliance with the mental formations of the seven consciousnesses, they together complete the manifestation and operation of all dharmas. This shows that the wisdom of ālaya-vijñāna and the consciousness of the seven consciousnesses—uniting the true and the false—always operate in harmony, manifesting all dharmas.

10.

The Tathāgatagarbha differentiates the rebirth body, the dependent living environment, and the karmic seeds through its perceiving aspect and the five universal mental factors: attention, contact, feeling, perception and volition. Attention directs the mind toward the the rebirth body, the dependent living environment and the karmic seeds. It then engages with them through contact, feeling, perception, and finally decision-making, initiating the delivery of the seven great seeds or the four great seeds to create the five skandhas, the eighteen realms of phenomena and the physical universe. In this way, myriad dharmas are manifested.

Throughout the entire process of creation and change, it continuously engages in the cycle of the five universal mental factors until the creation and transformation are complete. This process occurs kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa, depending on the karmic seeds, with the manifestation of myriad dharmas unfolding either suddenly or gradually. Creating a physical universe is no small feat—it is an immense operation that involves myriad collective karmic seeds

from infinite sentient beings. This creation process spans a quarter of a great kalpa, which is equivalent to twenty small kalpas.

Conversely, the creation of a sentient being's body occurs more swiftly, as it requires only the individual's Tathāgatagarbha. However, the scope of this process still surpasses the conscious mind's ability to fully comprehend, as we lack the wisdom to grasp its entirety. Additionally, the time required varies solely depending on the karmic seeds and involves factors such as the size of the body and the type of birth—whether moisture-born, egg-born, metamorphosis-born or womb-born.

11.

The Tathāgatagarbha cognizes the external five sensory realms —form, sound, smell, taste and touch. It not only recognizes their seeds but also perceives their overall appearances and the conditions of their minute particles—paramāṇu. Because it can absorb the four great minute particles, it must also cognize their states. It understands the rebirth body and the dependent living environment, both of which are formed by seeds. Countless seeds of the four great elements mix together, arising and ceasing kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa, enabling the Tathāgatagarbha to perceive the overall conditions and structures of the rebirth body and the dependent living environment. However, its cognition differs from how the six consciousnesses cognize the actual content. It knows the present and future conditions of the physical world, allowing it to maintain and modify these conditions. In this respect, it not only cognizes the seeds but also the material forms—rūpadharmas—that have manifested from them.

The Tathāgatagarbha's mental formations and conditions differ significantly from those of the seven consciousnesses, particularly in terms of wisdom. None of the consciousnesses can compare with the supramundane great wisdom that creates, manifests, maintains and nurtures all mundane dharmas.

The Tathāgatagarbha maintains and changes the five skandhas-body kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa, perceiving its current state and determining what changes are needed in the next kṣaṇa. It continuously adheres

to the karmic seeds of the five skandhas-body, whether to alleviate pain or sickness, worsen it, or allow the body to cease functioning entirely. None of these aspects escape the cognition of the Tathāgatagarbha, which adjusts accordingly to align with the karmic seeds and manifest their fruits.

If the collective seven consciousness-mind desires good financial fortune, the Tathāgatagarbha first cognizes their mental formations, then examines the karmic seeds to assess whether the conditions are ripe for such fortune to manifest. If the conditions are favorable, it complies with mano-āyatana by initiating various circumstances, ultimately leading to the fulfillment of the desire. However, if the conditions are not ripe, the Tathāgatagarbha disregards the situation and takes no action.

12.

In the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, during a dialogue between Huineng and Yongjia, Yongjia states, "Differentiation is also not a mind." [The term "mind" here in Chinese is "意" (yì), not "心" (xīn).] Some interpret this as referring to the differentiating nature of the seven consciousnesses, [with some English translations rendering it as "meaning."] However, this phrase actually points to the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha's differentiating nature. This teaching is profound and emphasizes the essence of Thusness, the true nature of the Tathāgatagarbha. It is important to note that the Sixth Patriarch focused solely on expounding the true mind and did not teach illusory dharmas.

The phrase "differentiation is also not a mind" signifies the differentiating nature of the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha. Although it can freely discern myriad dharmas, it lacks a discriminating mind or any intention within its mental formations. Free from attachment and concern, it flows naturally with affinity, perceiving all forms of dharma without actually perceiving them. Its essence is akin to empty space—free and unimpeded. This profound ease is the unimpeded mind of Buddha and the state of myriad Buddhas.

If the seven consciousness-minds functioned like the Tathāgatagarbha, suffering would cease to exist. Therefore, we should aspire to learn from the Tathāgatagarbha. Even if it means sacrificing our lives, we should rely on its primordial essence. This is the true path to liberation, capable of freeing us from the cycles of birth and death across infinite kalpas.

Let's examine the Tathāgatagarbha's differentiating nature. For instance, it differentiates karmic seeds, determines which seeds' conditions are ripe, and what karmic fruit should be brought forth. This differentiating nature represents the fundamental nature of reality and its functioning principle. In this case, we may question whether it differentiates all dharmas. It certainly does, but it does so without a mind, volition and mental formations; it follows the natural course and operates spontaneously.

13.

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha states, "the Tathāgatagarbha possesses wondrous luminous awareness that perfectly illuminates the Dharma Realm."

The Dharma Realm encompasses three aspects: first, the eighteen dharma realms, which include the six sense faculties, six sensory realms, and six consciousnesses; second, the ten dharma realms, consisting of the four noble realms and six ordinary realms; and third, the three realms of existence: the desire realm, form realm, and formless realm.

The Tathāgatagarbha is a subtle and profound essence of awareness that illuminates without ignorance; it is completely devoid of dis-illumination. This illumination means it comprehends every single dharma and knows them all. Although the Tathāgatagarbha within sentient beings illuminates their six sensory realms, it does so without perceiving their actual states, which is a significant departure from the perception of the six consciousnesses. As such, there is a saying: "Thusness is neither knowing nor non-knowing." This means it does not know the specific states of the six sensory realms but is not ignorant of all dharmas in the mundane and supramundane worlds. It fully shines

upon the Dharma Realm, encompassing, pervading, and caring for the four noble realms and the six ordinary realms, the three realms of existence and the nine grounds, as well as the six sense faculties, six sensory realms, and six consciousnesses.

To understand how the Tathāgatagarbha cares for all these aspects, one must engage in deep contemplative meditation to find out for themselves. Realizing this illumination clears the path to understanding Buddhadharma.

Chapter 5:
The Conditioned and Unconditioned Nature

1.

The Tathāgatagarbha possesses both conditioned and unconditioned aspects. Its conditioned aspect is reflected in its handling of karmic seeds—recording, storing and delivering them to bring about a sentient being's karmic fruits. Another facet of this conditioned nature is its capacity to apply the seven great seeds to create the five skandhas, the eighteen realms of phenomena and myriad dharmas in the physical universe. Once these elements are created, the Tathāgatagarbha governs and guides their arising, dwelling, changing and ceasing. It also cognizes a sentient being's rebirth body and their living environment, coordinating these elements with the activities of the five skandhas and seven consciousnesses.

All dharmas within the three realms of existence are manifested by the untainted conditioned nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, and their functionality reflects this conditioned aspect. Without this nature, no dharmas would exist or operate within the three realms, and thus, no five skandhas-body or their activities could manifest. It would resemble a true nirvanic state, where no dharma could exist apart from the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha.

The conditioned nature of the Tathāgatagarbha functions innately and remains untainted by the three poisons. For example, it delivers seeds to the seven consciousnesses, coordinates with their minds' activities, and provides the four great seeds—earth, water, fire and wind—that enable the formation of the form-body, the physical universe, the six sensory realms and the six consciousnesses. All mental and physical activities depend on its continuous, unceasing operation. Even when the five skandhas-body ceases functioning, the Tathāgatagarbha remains active throughout

dying, the after-death state, rebirth and the process of birth. This uninterrupted activity has persisted since beginningless time, without seeking rewards or acknowledgment, and without any sense of pride. It remains ever pure and unconditioned.

The unconditioned nature of the Tathāgatagarbha refers to its immovable and non-differentiating essence—Thusness—manifesting during its operation. Although it can create all dharmas in the three realms of existence, it does so without discrimination, its mind remaining unmoved and free from greed and aversion. Whether phenomena are good or bad, it simply follows karmic conditions. For this reason, it remains in a perpetual state of the "Great Shurangama Samādhi,"* without ever entering or exiting it. Free from the "eight winds"—gain, decline, defamation, praise, compliment, ridicule, suffering and joy—the Tathāgatagarbha embodies perfect equanimity. If our seven consciousness-minds attain this state, the Buddha-realm is within reach.

[*In English, "Shurangama" is often translated as "heroic march" or "heroic progress." While this translation is not incorrect when we consider the literal meanings of "shuran" and "gama" as described in Sanskrit dictionaries, it obscures the true essence of the Shurangama Samādhi.

In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra*, chapter 27, the Lion's Roars of Bodhisattvas, the Buddha expounded: "The Buddha-nature is the Great Shurangama Samādhi. Its nature is like sarpir-maṇḍa (a word in Chinese, "tihu," transliterated from Sanskrit, which sounds similar to 'ghee'), meaning it is the mother of all Buddhas, for its power keeps all Buddhas in the state of Permanence, Bliss, Self and Purity. All sentient beings possess the Great Shurangama Samādhi, but because they don't practice, they are unable to see it and thus unable to attain Anuttara-samyak-sambodhi. Sons of good families, there are five types of Great Shurangama Samādhi: the Great Shurangama Samādhi, Prajñāpāramitā, Vajra Samādhi, Lion's Roar Samādhi and Buddha-nature. Depending on the situation, their names vary... Sons of good families, 'Shuran' means everything completed [or the ultimate of all things], and 'gama' means firm. Thus, everything ultimately solid is Shurangama, and it is thereby refined as Buddha-nature."]

The unconditioned nature of the Tathāgatagarbha also reflects its mental formations. Lacking the six sense faculties, six sensory realms and six consciousnesses, it is free from actions of body, speech and mind. It does not interact with or differentiate between the six sensory realms, nor can it discern their good or bad qualities. This pure nature illustrates its unconditioned essence clearly and completely.

2.

Some believe that the Tathāgatagarbha possesses only the unconditioned nature. This is a misconception. No dharma exemplifies a more conditioned nature than the Tathāgatagarbha. It has never rested for even a kṣaṇa; it tirelessly manages all things, internally and externally, from the grand to the minute. Once it manifests the sense faculties, the rebirth body and their living environment, it must also continuously sustain them. All dharmas are its illusory creations, effortlessly ranging from particles and viruses to the vast Flower Treasury World-System and the Ocean of Worlds, including the various Buddhas in the ten directions and their infinite Nirmanakāya manifestations.

Therefore, it is incorrect to assert that the Tathāgatagarbha is purely an unconditioned dharma. Its nature is a harmonious blend of conditioned and unconditioned aspects, which together form the Tathāgatagarbha's virtues. Focusing on only one aspect of its nature would be incomplete. The misunderstanding arises from its completely non-self nature, which many fail to grasp. Once we recognize this, we will uncover its infinite meritorious virtues and gain insight into its conditioned nature.

In essence, the Tathāgatagarbha is free from mental formations, constructions, desires, grasping and volition to create any dharma. In this sense, its unconditioned nature is paradoxically both non-constructed and constructed; non-thinking and yet thinking; unconditioned and yet conditioned. Such wondrous, non-dual mental formations can only be comprehended by a Buddha's mind!

3.

"Tainted" refers to mental formations that are influenced by afflictions such as greed, hatred, delusion, arrogance, doubt and wrong views etc., while "untainted" is free from all such afflictions. "Conditioned" pertains to anything constructed, active, and associated with mental formations of body, speech and mind, whereas "unconditioned" is the opposite. The Tathāgatagarbha is an unconditioned dharma, free from defilements, afflictions, mental formations, bodily activities and mental constructions. For this reason, it is referred to as the self-nature pure mind.

Despite being unconditioned, its conditioned nature—untainted by afflictions—never ceases to deliver the seven great seeds and the seeds of the seven consciousnesses. It continuously and simultaneously produces and manifests all dharmas, storing and delivering karmic seeds to fulfill karmic fruits. This is its untainted conditioned aspect. Without this nature, there would be no sentient beings and their mundane world. From this, we can see that its contributions to the five skandhas and their mundane world are altruistic, and thus we say it is untainted. We must study well its untainted conditioned nature, its purely unconditioned aspect, and its altruistic conditioned functioning. By mastering these aspects and transforming our mental formations, our practice reaches its final destination.

To break free from the tainted afflictions of the five skandhas, it is essential to cut off the view of self. This initial step allows for progression to the First Dhyāna, in which greed and craving begin to be extinguished, followed by aversion. Once these afflictions are severed, one attains the third stage of fruition, Anāgāmī (Non-returner). When afflictions of greed, hatred, delusion, arrogance and self-grasping are fully eradicated, one reaches the fourth stage of fruition, Arahatta.

Heretics, however, are unable to sever the view of self. No matter how pure their mind-grounds may seem, they are merely suppressing their afflictions rather than cutting them off. Consequently, they remain trapped in the cycle of samsara. When their good fortune and virtuous merits accumulated from their

practice are depleted, their concentration weakens, and afflictions return. Therefore, merely practicing samādhi is insufficient for liberation from samsara; we must also rely on the wisdom developed from cutting off the view of self to ultimately free ourselves from the suffering of the cycle of birth and death.

Untainted conditioned dharmas refer to the actions of body, speech and mind carried out by sages who have attained the stages of Anāgāmī and Arahatta. In contrast, tainted conditioned dharmas refer to the actions of those below the Anāgāmī stage, particularly ordinary sentient beings. Anāgāmīs, having partially eradicated their afflictions, are in a state that is half tainted and half untainted.

Tainted unconditioned dharmas apply to those whose afflictions have not yet been fully eradicated. During samādhi, their conscious mind weakens, the manifestation of phenomena decreases, and afflictions temporarily diminish or disappear. This phenomenon reflects the nature of tainted unconditioned dharmas.

4.

In the *Śāstra on the Door of Understanding the One-Hundred Dharmas*, Vasubandhu described six types of unconditioned dharmas, which encompass those from both the true mind and the false mind. The strength of concentration varies according to the degree of practice associated with these unconditioned dharmas. The unconditioned dharmas of the false minds include those related to the first five consciousnesses, as well as mano-vijñāna and mano-āyatana.

When the mano-āyatana cut off grasping in the state of Cessation of Consciousness Samādhi, the mental factors of sensation and perception are ceased, constituting a form of the unconditioned. Similarly, when an Arhat's mano-āyatana severs their grasping and loses interest in mundane dharmas within the three realms of existence, this too is considered unconditioned. In the state of the Fourth Dhyāna, where awareness remains still and physiological processes such as breathing and pulse cease, this state is also regarded as unconditioned. The same applies to the first and second stages of fruition, namely Sotāpanna (Stream-enterer) and

Sakadāgāmī (Once-returner) in Pāli. As they realize the illusory nature of the five skandhas and self, their attachment to self, the five sensory pleasures, and the six sensory realms weakens. This weakening constitutes an aspect of the unconditioned. With further wisdom and deeper samādhi, the degree of the unconditioned increases.

The false minds, also known as the seven consciousnesses, encompass both conditioned and unconditioned dharmas. Similarly, the Tathāgatagarbha embodies aspects of both conditioned and unconditioned nature. The conditioned aspect of the Tathāgatagarbha involves its ability to provide everything necessary for a sentient being's existence and to sustain their life. To do so, it records the mental formations of body, speech and mind, stores the karmic seeds generated by their actions, and delivers these ripened seeds when conditions are ready. These myriad conditioned aspects fulfill the needs of living activities and the requirements for mundane dharmas within the three realms of existence.

5.

The Tathāgatagarbha's conditioned nature involves delivering the seven great seeds according to karmic conditions and manifesting myriad dharmas across the three realms of existence. It produces the rebirth body, the dependent living environment and the seven consciousnesses, along with the mental formations of body, speech and mind that each sentient being requires for existence, as well as all dharmas in the three realms. This vast illusory creation is continuously maintained and upheld by the conditioned nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, which governs the permanent arising, ceasing, and transmutation of their characteristics through its own mental factors. Simultaneously, the functioning of its Buddha-nature perpetually operates and manifests within these dharmas.

However, its mental formation is unconditioned, performing all these works without ideological thought or intention. It simply follows the karmic seeds and the mental formations of the seven consciousnesses, operating in alignment with Thusness,

continuously and effortlessly. Free from ignorance, the afflictions of the three poisons and karmic propensities, it lacks mental formations that serve self-interest. It neither takes initiative to act nor seeks to govern; this exemplifies its pure unconditioned nature.

When we verify and awaken to our Tathāgatagarbha, we can directly observe how it operates across all dharmas. We will see that, within its conditioned functioning, the unconditioned nature is also present. We will witness the perfect union of both conditioned and unconditioned aspects, enabling it to manifest all dharmas without being constrained by them. This realization reveals its inherent role as the great liberator, inspiring us to revere, rely on, and learn from it.

Unconditioned" signifies the absence of mental formations, ideologies, grasping, clinging and the sense of self. It is free from the three poisons, selfishness and self-benefit. By observing and learning from these characteristics, our minds can align with its nature. By integrating this understanding without abandoning the conditioned aspect, our minds become increasingly pure and unconditioned. With the right practice, attaining Buddhahood ceases to be an arduous task. Observing and learning from its conditioned nature awakens our Bodhisattva nature, allowing us to joyfully and selflessly benefit sentient beings without seeking personal gain.

In summary, by learning and realizing the Tathāgatagarbha's pure and great wisdom—its conditioned and unconditioned aspects —we move closer to Omniscient Wisdom and the ability to interpenetrate all dharmas without obstruction. Therefore, perceiving and awakening to our Tathāgatagarbhas is paramount in our practice. This path opens our wisdom and expands our cittapramāṇa—the capacity of mind— enabling us to overcome all internal obstacles.

6.

We may wonder: since myriad Buddhas in the ten directions have already attained Buddhahood, do they still possess a conditioned nature? If a Buddha were devoid of conditioned nature,

they would be bound to dwell forever in the Realm of Eternal Quiescent Light—Nitya-prabhāsa-śānta-kṣetra, ceasing to manifest the three thousandfold universe and halting the manifestation of infinite nirmāṇakāyas across the ten directions. This would contradict the fact that every Buddha tirelessly manifests infinite nirmāṇakāyas to aid and benefit countless sentient beings.

Shakyamuni Buddha revealed in the *Brahma's Net Sutra* that he has appeared in various Sahā worlds eight thousand times. His arrival in our Sahā world signifies the presence of the conditioned aspect—to unlock our innate great wisdom, empower us to realize the wisdom and virtues of the Tathāgata, and to vastly benefit infinite sentient beings. Engaging with our impure world, interacting with stubborn and ignorant beings, and making tremendous efforts purely to benefit us and rescue countless suffering beings—all these actions reflect the Buddha's conditioned nature.

To achieve such arduous tasks, the Buddha's mind relies on an absolute, unconditioned nature, entirely forsaking any personal benefit. In performing these conditioned tasks, the Buddha depends on his unconditioned amala-vijñāna to manifest the five skandhas-body and the mundane dharmas. In this sense, the amala-vijñāna also possesses a conditioned aspect. However, the amala-vijñāna alone cannot accomplish all this work. It requires coordination with the wisdom of the seven consciousnesses, including the Wisdom of Equality, the Wisdom of Profound Insight, and the Wisdom of Perfect Conduct to create all dharmas. The Ultimate Great Wisdom of the seven consciousnesses is itself a result of the conditioned aspect of the amala-vijñāna. Thus, the Tathāgatagarbha's amala-vijñāna encompasses both conditioned and unconditioned aspects.

The Buddha's amala-vijñāna manifests the five skandhas and the thirty-two physical characteristics, coordinating with the five skandhas-body to expound all the teachings of the Tripiṭaka and to boundlessly aid infinite sentient beings. These actions demonstrate the conditioned nature of the Buddha's amala-vijñāna, as well as the conditioned nature of his five skandhas-body and seven consciousnesses. Simultaneously, the amala-vijñāna remains unconditioned, pure and untainted, free from greed and ignorance.

The Buddha's mind is inherently pure and unconditional; regardless of the countless good deeds accomplished or the number of sentient beings saved, it does not cling to any idea of achievement. In essence, the Buddha embodies the most pure and unconditional mind.

7.

The unconditioned nature of Thusness means it constructs no mental formations of body, speech and mind, as it lacks the six sense faculties, six sensory realms and six consciousnesses. It neither engages with nor distinguishes between mundane dharmas in the three realms of existence and is unaware of their good or bad qualities. Thus, its unconditioned nature is reflected in its pure essence, as it neither initiates actions nor governs anything. It simply follows the inherent operating principles, always abiding by causes and conditions.

8.

Unconditioned dharma refers to the eighth consciousness. Unlike conditioned dharma, which is subject to change, the eighth consciousness, being non-arising and non-ceasing, is an authentically true Dharma that has existed since beginningless time. In contrast to the false self represented by the five skandhas and seven consciousnesses, the eighth consciousness is the true Self. Sentient beings and Bodhisattvas at various stages still carry seeds of arising and ceasing and have not yet fully realized their true self. It is only upon reaching the Buddha-realm and extinguishing all defiled seeds that they fully transform into the true Self, characterized by the essence of Permanence, Bliss, Self and Purity.

9.

The phrase "all sages and holy ones are distinguished by means of the unconditioned dharma" in the *Diamond Sutra* refers to four types of sages and holy beings: Śrāvakas (from the first to the fourth

fruition), Pratyekabuddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Buddhas. Among them, both Bodhisattvas and Buddhas have attained the true unconditioned dharma and the Nirvanic-mind. A Buddha's mental formations are entirely unconditioned, reflecting the same attribute as the Nirvanic-mind and amala-vijñāna, due to their complete reliance on the essence of amala-vijñāna. For Bodhisattvas, the degree of unconditioned nature is determined by their mental formations, their attainment of samādhi, and their wisdom. Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas have not fully realized the unconditioned Nirvanic-mind. Their level of unconditioned nature depends on their samādhi power and the liberated-wisdom they practice, rather than directly on the Nirvanic-mind. Upon passing away, their five skandhas-body ceases, and their ability to benefit sentient beings and desire to continue the path are limited. While alive, they focus on samādhi, keeping their minds detached from phenomena and samsaric affairs.

The unconditioned nature of Bodhisattvas signifies their attainment of the unconditioned mind of the Tathāgatagarbha. They rely on this unconditioned nature to engage in conditioned dharmas, such as practicing and studying the Buddhadharma and benefiting sentient beings. They cultivate virtuous merits and blessing through conditioned practices while minimizing their reliance on conditioned nature. Ultimately, they use their unconditioned nature to perform the Buddha's work, remaining in the three realms of existence but unattached to mundane dharmas within these realms. This level of unconditionality surpasses that of Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas. Therefore, "all sages and holy ones are distinguished by means of the unconditioned dharma."

Chapter 6:
Non-Attainability of the Tathāgatagarbha

1.

The Tathāgatagarbha is a non-attainable mind. It neither acquires nor possesses any dharma, nor does it claim ownership of them. Its primordial essence is thoroughly empty, pure and unstained. We describe it as a non-attainable primordial essence because it is free from any desires for the mundane dharmas of the three realms of existence; it neither perceives nor engages with these dharmas. This purity extends to the supramundane dharmas as well. Even with the attainment of Buddhahood—a dharma we might aspire to—the Tathāgatagarbha has no desire or craving for this attainment. Its nature is characterized by a complete absence of craving for all dharmas, making it fundamentally non-attainable. Although it contains all dharma seeds and manifests and produces all phenomena—indicating that all things belong to it—it does not recognize or crave them. Its lack of awareness regarding its own ownership ensures that it remains devoid of desire and craving.

Generally speaking, only the false minds of the seven consciousnesses harbor the notion of gaining, as they arise from greed, craving and grasping. However, this perception is superficial. In truth, the seven consciousness-minds also have nothing to gain and cannot obtain any dharma due to their arising, ceasing and transmuting nature. Their existence and functions rely entirely on the operations and seeds delivered by the Tathāgatagarbha; their self-nature is unreal and illusory, with no capacity to store anything. Likewise, the external dharmas they grasp—also manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha—are illusory and unobtainable. This is akin to someone in a dream discussing the events within the dream.

In this light, we can see that sentient beings are experiencing gains and losses in the form of illusions, and these gains and losses are also illusory, like a magic show that blinds the mental consciousness. Since beginningless time, the seven consciousnesses have been grasping and craving, falsely clinging to the five skandhas. Yet, in each life, the five skandhas extinguish and vanish, never successfully grasped, while accumulating countless karmic debts. As a result, sentient beings continue to transmigrate into karmically-laden bodies, allowing the seven consciousnesses to perpetuate their suffering.

Although the Tathāgatagarbha does not acquire any dharma, and neither do the seven consciousnesses, the illusory forms of the mundane world continue to exist and manifest illusory functions. Therefore, we should treat them wisely, putting them to good use, and making our conducts of body, speech and mind pure, aligning with the unconditioned nature. By doing so, we perform the Buddha's work and benefit both ourselves and others. While samsara is illusory and its cycles persist, it is an issue that every practitioner must address and practice—understanding how to detach from these illusory sufferings and respond to them appropriately.

Though afflictions are illusory, we must still work to extinguish them; though the hell realm is illusory, we must stay away from it. We live amid illusions and cannot escape their false appearances, so we must make them wholesome and improve them. Attaining Buddhahood is also illusory and unattainable, but we must still strive diligently to reach it. Although sentient beings are illusory, Bodhisattvas never cease performing their illusory Buddha work to aid and save transmigrating sentient beings. Causes and conditions are empty in nature, but we must learn to recognize causes and understand fruition by performing wholesome deeds to bring about wholesome karmic fruits. Ultimately, we cannot depart from illusory phenomena, and we have no choice but to make them wholesome—this is the principle of the mundane and supramundane.

2.

Is self-nature dependent on origination?

As the name implies, self-nature refers to the characteristic of the self; it is a dharma that exists independently with an unchanging and constant attribute. In other words, it is the essence of something that exists on its own and does not depend on external phenomena. The Tathāgatagarbha has its self-nature and functions independently, without relying on other conditions. Therefore, it is free from the four characteristics of all phenomena: arising, abiding, changing and ceasing.

However, for a sentient being's Tathāgatagarbha to manifest and for them to verify it, they must rely on name-and-form (referring to mano-āyatana) and the five skandhas, as well as the eighteen realms of phenomena. Simply put, the operations of name-and-form and the five skandhas are required for the realization of one's Tathāgatagarbha.

Self-nature generally refers to the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha. Since it does not depend on external conditions for its existence, and no dharma can alter it, it is said to possess self-nature. In contrast, the myriad unreal dharmas lack these characteristics. The fact that they are manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha indicates their impermanent and ceasing nature.

Self-nature, being not dependent on origination, has always existed and is the only dharma not born from causes and conditions. It represents a non-arising and non-ceasing true mind with real existence. In contrast, all other dharmas are dependent-originated and are manifested from self-nature, making them illusory. For example, mountains, rivers and vegetation lack self-nature; their manifestations depend on numerous conditions and the Tathāgatagarbha of sentient beings who share collective karma. As a result, they cannot determine their own arising, abiding, changing and ceasing.

Myriad dharmas and self-nature are neither one nor different. The self-nature of the Tathāgatagarbha encompasses all dharmas, yet it does not intermingle with the dharmas it manifests. When myriad dharmas cease, the Tathāgatagarbha remains unchanged, as

it has always been. Empty space is one dharma among the myriad dharmas within the Tathāgatagarbha. Although empty space is boundless, it constitutes only a tiny part within the Tathāgatagarbha, and the mundane worlds in the ten directions exist within this space. Each sentient being's karmic seeds have been stored in their Tathāgatagarbha since beginningless time. The number of karmic seeds each sentient being possesses is beyond the capacity of any supercomputer to calculate, and they are all stored in each individual's Tathāgatagarbha. Thus, the Tathāgatagarbha is immeasurably vast. It is formless, volumeless and boundless, capable of containing infinite kalpas of karmic seeds. Because of its formless nature, it transcends size. What is perceived as the largest is still small, and what is perceived as the smallest is still large.

3.

Not relying on other factors, existing naturally on its own, and possessing its true nature is called having self-nature. The Tathāgatagarbha is the only entity that possesses self-nature. The self-nature pure mind and the self-nature of the Three Jewels all embody this self-nature. Self-nature is characterized by its real and independent essence. Thus, taking refuge in the Self means taking refuge in our own self-nature—the Tathāgatagarbha of the Three Jewels.

All dharmas lack self-nature, meaning that, except for the Tathāgatagarbha, all dharmas do not possess intrinsic nature. Their manifestation depends on karmic conditions and the illusory transformations of the seven consciousness-minds. In other words, they are illusory creations based on various conditions manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha. Therefore, they do not have self-nature; they are expressions of the Tathāgatagarbha's nature.

Take the five skandhas-body, for example. It is called a sentient being, but it does not determine its own existence. Instead, it is produced and sustained by the Tathāgatagarbha, making it an illusory phenomenon that arises and ceases. Therefore, it does not have a true intrinsic identity and is regarded as not having self-nature. All dharmas are manifested by causes and conditions, with

causes being the Tathāgatagarbha and conditions being karmic seeds. The dharma arising from causes and conditions is dependent origination, which lacks its own intrinsic nature and is impermanent.

4.

Myriad dharmas not having self-nature means all dharmas and the six sensory realms are produced and cannot determine their own existence. Except for the Tathāgatagarbha, nothing has a true intrinsic identity; they are illusory, empty and lack the nature of self.

Chapter 7:
The Nature of Pure and Defiled

1.

The Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence possesses the innate pure and undefiled seven great seeds, which pervade all dharmas across the three times, all grounds and all realms. Alongside these great seeds, it stores a sentient being's wholesome, unwholesome and neutral karmic seeds. These karmic seeds enable the Tathāgatagarbha to create and manifest all dharmas within the three realms of existence, delivering karmic fruits and facilitating the formation, duration, decay and void of phenomena in the three realms of existence and the physical universe. Only the Tathāgatagarbha can make use of its seven great seeds to fully operate and manifest all dharmas in these realms; similarly, only it can cognize, store, processes and deliver the karmic seeds, ensuring the fulfillment of a sentient being's karmic fruits.

Before the Tathāgatagarbha brings forth mundane dharmas, a process involving the mental factors of attention, contact, sensation, perception and volition takes place. The Tathāgatagarbha then delivers either the seven great seeds or the four great seeds, depending on karmic conditions, thereby initiating the formation of the five skandhas and mundane dharmas. Through this methodical process, the operations within the three realms of existence begin. Although the seven great seeds themselves are not consciousness and lack cognition, they depend on the Tathāgatagarbha to produce and manifest myriad dharmas. Concurrently, the Tathāgatagarbha cognizes karmic seeds and generates the five skandhas and myriad dharmas accordingly.

Being a form of consciousness, the Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence possesses cognition and mental factor functionality. Its operations rely solely on these mental factors,

using its great perceiving functioning for cognition and the seven great seeds to bring forth all dharmas. Similarly, the seven consciousnesses rely on their mental factors for operation, though they require the Tathāgatagarbha to first deliver the appropriate consciousness seeds. These seeds enable the mental factors to engage in cognition and differentiation of dharmas within the six sensory realms.

The Tathāgatagarbha also maintains a continuous stream of consciousness, ensuring the uninterrupted operation of its primordial essence, allowing the unending creation and manifestation of all dharmas. Even when an Arhat attains the full extinction of existence, their consciousness seeds continue streaming, sustaining the activity of their Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence. Upon the maturation of their karmic seeds, the mano-āyatana arises, initiating the construction of the five skandhas. Consequently, the Arhat will be reborn within the three realms of existence, engaging in Mahayana practice to benefit sentient beings.

Though the seven consciousness-minds are tainted by the three poisons, and karmic seeds are stored in the Tathāgatagarbha due to karmic activities, the Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence remains pure. It does not generate its own afflictions or hold unwholesome and wrong views; instead, it operates within mundane dharmas in the three realms of existence with its intrinsic purity. The Tathāgatagarbha encompasses all dharmas impartially, whether a sentient being's actions are wholesome, unwholesome or neutral, without showing preference. It records, stores and delivers karmic seeds while aligning with the mental formations of the seven consciousnesses. This impartiality and non-discriminating nature qualify it as the self-nature pure mind.

The seven consciousnesses interact with the six sensory realms, using their false minds to differentiate phenomena. This differentiation leads to mental formations that create attachments or aversions, such as liking and disliking. Until all afflictions are eliminated, perceiving the empty nature of the five skandhas and the six sensory realms remains difficult, resulting in defiled actions of body, speech and mind. Overcoming these defilements requires

first recognizing the empty nature of the five skandhas and the sensory realms. Gradually, as self-grasping is extinguished, the mind becomes purer and the defilements lessen.

When one verifies and awakens to one's nature, they recognize the empty nature of both the five skandhas and the self. From this point, they engage in contemplative* and concentration (samādhi) practices, progressively reducing afflictions and purifying the mind-ground. By relying on and abiding in Thusness, the self-grasping that the mano-āyatana clings to gradually loosens. Eventually, this loosening extinguishes afflictions, leading to an untainted mind-ground.

[*Contemplative practice, known as "guānxíng" (觀行) in Chinese, is a type of Vipassana technique practiced by the Chinese Yogācāra School. This practice consists of two key aspects: observing the mental formations of the sixth and seventh consciousnesses and contemplating or investigating specific dharma characteristics or teachings. Xuanzang translated this practice as "xúnsì" (尋伺), where "xún" corresponds to the Sanskrit term "vitarka," and "sì" to "vicāra." "Vitarka" refers to directing attention toward a phenomenon or teaching, followed by an investigation—"vicāra."

Master Shengru explains that "xún" primarily involves the mental activity of the sixth consciousness, which operates in an active mode, constructing gross thoughts and searching for insights. As the mind progresses to the "sì" stage, the mental formations become more subtle, with a focus on contemplation and investigation.

The seventh consciousness—mano-āyatana—also engages in both "xún" and "sì," but its mental formations are much subtler. For example, when the sixth consciousness forgets something, the seventh consciousness actively searches for it, embodying the "xún" state. Simultaneously, the sixth consciousness may also search, whether in the "xún" or "sì" state. However, when the seventh consciousness enters the "sì" stage, the sixth consciousness ceases its "xún" activity but may continue to engage in "sì." In such cases, the mano-āyatana operates independently, seeking to recall the forgotten information. Master Shengru notes that the "sì" of the mano-āyatana is even subtler than its "xún," leading many to deny the existence of most of its mental factors due to their subtlety.

The practice of "xúnsì" closely parallels the inquiry of Huatou or Koan, where a doubt or inquiry is deeply imprinted into the mano-

āyatana over time. This raises an intriguing question: since the mano-āyatana operates beyond language and its mental formations are so subtle, how can we discern its role in "xúnsì" during contemplation? I feel the first two sentences from Hongzi's "Mozhao"—"Silently and serenely, one forgets all words. Clearly and vividly, it appears before you."—may provide some clarity, helping us detect the mental formations of the mano-āyatana.

As one's "guānxíng" practice deepens and wisdom increases, direct perception of the mental formations of the mano-āyatana begins to unfold, eventually leading to the verification and realization of the formless form of ālaya-vijñāna.

Final Thought: Some of our Chinese Zen ancestors may not have been explicitly familiar with Yogācāra teachings or the technique of engaging the mano-āyatana in their meditation. However, I believe they practiced "guānxíng," also known as "chánguān" or "cānchán" (禪觀/參禪) in Chinese, used by Chan practitioners since ancient times, or "zenkan" or "sanzen" in Japanese. This "cānchán/sanzen" does not involve Dokusan as understood by the Western Zen, as Dōgen made it clear in Fukanzazengi. Regardless of the type of meditation one practices, including Shikantaza, kensho and awakening can only be attained through mano-āyatana directly verifying and realizing the Tathāgatagarbha, as the comprehension-verification of mano-vijñāna remains at a superficial level. Master Shengru sometimes uses "chánguān" or "cānchán" interchangeably with "guānxíng," and for consistency, except in rare cases where any of the Chinese terms is more appropriate, these terms are translated as "contemplative" or "contemplation."]

The seven consciousnesses, often referred to as false minds, are entangled with defilements, ignorance and the afflictions of the three poisons. When we engage in karmic actions, the resulting seeds are automatically stored within the Tathāgatagarbha, marking the birth of karmic seeds. As causes and conditions ripen, these karmic seeds bring forth their effects, leading to both their arising and eventual cessation. This process causes the Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence to contain defiled seeds, which possess the nature of arising and ceasing. Consequently, the intrinsically pure primordial essence takes on a nature of both non-defiled and non-

pure. Despite this, the Tathāgatagarbha itself remains inherently pure and undefiled.

The Tathāgatagarbha is free from the afflictions of the three poisons and ignorance because it does not correspond to the phenomena of the six sensory realms and is therefore unable to differentiate them, preventing it from generating defiled mental formations. Devoid of ignorance, it can cognize all mundane dharmas in the three realms of existence, thereby manifesting all phenomena.

In the final stage of practice, ignorance is extinguished, and the seven consciousnesses are thoroughly purified. The karmic seeds are transformed into purity, and the primordial essence returns to its original face. Its non-defiled, non-pure, neither breaking nor changing, non-arising and non-ceasing nature is transformed into the authentically true state of Permanence, Bliss, Self and Purity, becoming the original Great Wholesome Buddha. At this stage, it is referred to as amala-vijñāna, Thusness, or Great Mirror Wisdom, and its primordial essence is completely and truly Thus.

2.

The Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence is referred to as the self-nature pure mind. It remains inherently pure and does not require practice to maintain its purity. The need for practice arises only for the seven consciousnesses due to their defilements and ignorance. Through diligent practice, we can extinguish these defilements, purifying the seven consciousness-minds and transforming them into wisdom. As previously mentioned, the defiled karmic seeds are stored within the Tathāgatagarbha. While the Tathāgatagarbha itself remains pure, its essence contains both non-defiled and non-pure aspects because of these seeds. Through practice, ignorance and afflictions within the mano- and manas-vijñāna are gradually reduced and purified, leading to the extinguishment of defiled seeds and the transformation of the defilements in the seven consciousnesses into purity.

Upon verifying and realizing our Tathāgatagarbha, although we have severed beginningless ignorance, there still remains

imperceptible ignorance as subtle as dusty sands. The essence of the seven consciousnesses is not yet fully purified. To achieve complete purification, we must study the teachings thoroughly, continuously engage in profound and subtle "quanxing," and deeply comprehend the workings of the seeds stored within the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha. Each principle we understand gradually eradicates a small portion of ignorance. The path to Buddhahood involves understanding countless principles incrementally until all ignorance is cut off and ultimate purity is attained.

Our ignorance, having thickened through countless cycles of samsara, is deeply ingrained and cannot be eradicated quickly. This is like a basket used for manure over a long time; while it can eventually be cleaned, the odor lingers much longer. For this reason, the Buddha teaches that attaining Buddhahood takes three great Asamkhyeya kalpas. However, with diligent practice, we can shorten this time by enhancing our root of kindness, which then accelerates the progress of our practice. Therefore, we must cultivate the root of kindness, accumulate virtuous merits, and advance diligently in our practice to cross the river of birth and death and ultimately dwell in the Realm of Eternal Quiescent Light.

3.

The Tathāgatagarbha operates in accordance with its inherent principles, functioning thusly and without external influence. It manifests all dharmas based on the karmic seeds stored within it, and neither external forces nor individuals can govern or alter its operations. The Tathāgatagarbha cannot be communicated with or persuaded to change its course, as it strictly follows the law of causes and conditions. Even if we desire to prevent the manifestation of negative karmic fruits, we are powerless to stop it, for the Tathāgatagarbha continues to manifest according to the karma we have accumulated. It neither chooses what to manifest nor does it do so randomly.

Our focus should not be on trying to control the Tathāgatagarbha's operations but rather on cultivating the seven consciousness-minds by eliminating defilements and transforming

ignorance. By creating pure karma and storing wholesome karmic seeds, we ensure that the Tathāgatagarbha will provide us with unimpeded great ease. When karmic conditions ripen, it will naturally deliver wholesome karmic seeds, resulting in a dignified and solemn body, a wonderful living environment, and transforming our existence into a pure land. Thus, we need only focus on purifying our seven consciousness-minds, knowing that the Tathāgatagarbha will manifest the appropriate results when the time is right.

4.

The ālaya-vijñāna itself is pure and undefiled. It possesses no ignorance and is free from the afflictions of the three poisons as well as from karmic propensity. It does not correspond with the phenomena of the six sense bases or cognize the six sensory realms. However, for sentient beings who have not yet reached the eighth ground of the Bodhisattva Path, their defiled karmic seeds are stored in their ālaya-vijñānas. As a result, the seeds delivered are stained, leading to negative karmic fruits. At the eighth ground of the Bodhisattva Path, a Bodhisattva's afflictions and karmic propensities are exhausted, and segmented birth and death cease. Although the Bodhisattva no longer experiences segmented life, and their lifespan appears very long, there remains an inconceivable transformative birth and death, and the phenomena of birth and death still persist. At this stage, the ālaya-vijñāna changes its name to vipāka-vijñāna, sometimes referred to as the ninth consciousness as a skillful means—not that an additional consciousness is created. However, its essence still contains imperceptible ignorance from the seven consciousness-minds, but it remains the same Tathāgatagarbha.

When the imperceptible ignorance is completely exhausted, its name changes to the tenth consciousness, or amala-vijñāna, the Great Mirror Wisdom, or Thusness. At this stage, the seven consciousness-minds no longer contain ignorance, afflictions and karmic propensities; they are thoroughly pure, and the tenth consciousness is devoid of defiled karmic seeds, thus it is called the

pure consciousness—the amala-vijñāna. In reality, it is inherently pure, and it is the seven consciousness-minds that burden its purity. Attaining Buddhahood does not mean acquiring an additional consciousness. It is still the same eight consciousnesses and has now transformed into the four wisdom.

5.

Thusness is formless and featureless. It cannot be seen by the eyes, heard by the ears, smelled by the nose, tasted by the tongue, touched by the body, or conceived by the conscious mind. Yet, it can be understood, cognized, sought, verified and realized. Once realized, the conscious mind continues to observe its functioning, discerning its various characteristics and nature, and comprehending the seeds it stores. Noting its pure, unconditioned and conditioned, perpetual and unstopping nature, one's wisdom gained through realization sharpens and increases; this wisdom is called Subsequently Attained Wisdom.

How does the purity of Thusness function? When the eyes see forms, both eye consciousness and mano-vijñāna differentiate the form sensory realm, leading to craving or aversion. Consequently, mano-vijñāna produces thoughts, perceives feelings, and constructs mental formations, creating karmas of greed, hatred and delusion. However, Thusness has no eyes and sees no forms. It is devoid of thoughts and mental formations related to forms, and it does not give rise to thoughts that construct karmic actions. Whatever we like, Thusness does not like; whatever we hate, Thusness does not hate. It aids in perceiving forms and facilitating experiences, yet it remains unconcerned.

When sounds are heard and the six sense faculties come into contact with the six sensory realms, mano-vijñāna again produces thoughts, clinging to the phenomena of this contact, and constructing karmic actions rooted in the three poisons. However, Thusness lacks the six sense faculties and does not correspond with the six sensory realms. It does not produce thoughts or participate in karmic actions, remaining free from defiled nature. Despite this,

Thusness still facilitates the functions of the seven consciousnesses without being attached to them.

Similarly, when we eat, choosing delicious food, Thusness does not eat, for it has no mouth and remains indifferent to what we consume. It does not care about the clothes we wear, as it has no body. Whether we learn wholesome or unwholesome dharmas, Thusness remains indifferent, yet it cooperates with our learning. When we experience joy or anger, it does not engage, but it supports our experiences. Even in the case of life and death decisions, including suicide, Thusness neither encourages nor prevents action, but cooperates, indifferent to the outcome.

Thusness possesses a pristine, pure mind-ground, free from preferences. Nothing affects it; it remains pure at all times. Its intrinsic nature is empty and formless, yet all forms arise from its essence. Thus, its true Emptiness gives rise to Wondrous Becoming, making it the foundation of both Emptiness and Becoming. Upon realizing its primordial essence, we must understand its empty and unconditioned nature, while also practicing its non-empty aspects and cultivating virtuous merits. Only then can our inherent great wisdom develop, leading to the attainment of Subsequently Attained Wisdom, Non-discriminating Wisdom, and Path Wisdom, allowing us to enter the First Ground of Rejoicing—Pramuditā-bhūmi—and gradually advance through each ground until we attain Buddhahood.

The Path Wisdom studied by Bodhisattvas on the Ground focuses on the non-empty nature of Thusness and the aspects related to karmic seeds. These subjects are profound and challenging. Thusness can only be comprehended by the conscious mind, as it does not perceive or verify its own nature. Even if it did, the false minds do not recognize it, and ignorance persists, as do the karmic obstacles of birth and death. The conscious mind is the primary means by which practice and perception are understood. Without it, sentient beings would be unable to differentiate and comprehend, underscoring its essential role in practice.

6.

The Tathāgatagarbha is an unstained mind—utterly free from contamination. Though the seven consciousness-minds are tainted by the afflictions of the three poisons and their karmic seeds are stored in the Tathāgatagarbha, its primordial essence remains pure and unstained by these seeds. It never possesses the nature of these afflictions, nor does it produce them. Nevertheless, it embraces all dharmas, regardless of their attributes, while remaining unconcerned. Its role is to store karmic seeds and coordinate with the seven consciousnesses in constructing various karmic deeds.

The Tathāgatagarbha does not correspond with the phenomena of the six sensory realms, making it a completely non-differentiating pure mind. In contrast, the seven consciousness-minds engage with the six sensory realms, responding to phenomena with thoughts and mental formations. When they encounter sensory objects, they arise and produce thoughts, making it difficult to perceive the empty nature of the five skandhas and the six sensory realms, which leads to the harboring of defilements.

To remove the defilements from the seven consciousnesses, we must first recognize the intrinsic empty nature of the six sensory realms, particularly the empty nature of the five skandhas, and see through our attachment to a false sense of self. Upon realizing our Tathāgatagarbha or attaining fruition, we come to understand the empty nature of the self within the five skandhas. Through continued practice, afflictions and defilements gradually diminish. By taking refuge in Thusness and transforming our false minds to align with it, we can sever the self-grasping of the mano-āyatana. This will lead to the cessation of afflictions and allow us to realize the unconditioned nature.

7. The Tathāgatagarbha that is in bondage and free from bondage

The Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence remains pure and undefiled despite storing the defiled karmic seeds from the seven consciousnesses. These seeds are present within the

Tathāgatagarbha, but they do not affect its intrinsic purity. It is like an elegant packaging box that contains dirty items—the box itself remains smooth and unstained, unaffected by its contents. In the same way, though the Tathāgatagarbha stores countless defiled karmic seeds, it neither engages in unwholesome deeds nor generates thoughts of greed or even wholesome thoughts. Thus, no matter how defiled the stored karmic seeds may be, they cannot tarnish the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha.

When the Tathāgatagarbha interacts with these defiled seeds, they form an integrated essence known as ālaya-vijñāna. This ālaya-vijñāna is marked by qualities that are simultaneously non-arising and non-ceasing, non-defiled and non-pure, yet encompassing both defiled and pure aspects. Although the defiled karmic seeds do not stain the Tathāgatagarbha itself, they can influence and burden it. The Tathāgatagarbha cannot operate in isolation; it is bound to accompany the seven consciousnesses and their karmic seeds, resulting in a continuous engagement with defiled karmic activities. In this state, only the five universal mental factors are active, while the five particular discerning mental factors and eleven wholesome mental factors remain dormant.

However, when the seven consciousnesses are purified, and the defiled karmic seeds stored in the Tathāgatagarbha are thoroughly transformed, they no longer burden it. At this stage, the primordial essence fully manifests its virtues, and the mental factors increase to twenty-one, including the previously inactive five particular discerning mental factors and the eleven wholesome mental factors. Before this transformation, four of the five particular discerning mental factors—firm conviction (adhimokṣa), mindfulness (smṛti), concentration (samādhi) and wisdom (prajñā)—were undeveloped and only appear fully in the Buddha-realm. Upon purification, these discerning mental factors also manifest completely.

When the Tathāgatagarbha is no longer weighed down by defiled seeds and is freed from the bondage of ignorance, it is referred to as the “free from bondage Dharmakāya.” In contrast, when entangled by defiled seeds, it is known as the “bondaged Tathāgatagarbha.” Once liberated, the Tathāgatagarbha is called amala-vijñāna, the unstained consciousness. Without the burden of defiled seeds, it

becomes unentangled, allowing its functionings and virtues to be fully expressed. Its luminosity shines unobstructed, pervading and illuminating heaven and earth without impediment.

8.

The Tathāgatagarbha's storing functioning operates through three key aspects. First, it possesses a storing nature that holds the seeds of the five skandhas—the form-body and the resultant physical world—thereby manifesting myriad dharmas. Second, it functions as a storehouse, retaining a sentient being's karmic seeds, regardless of their condition, pure or defiled. Third, it possesses an appropriating nature, causing the mano-āyatana to mistakenly identify it as the self.

The Tathāgatagarbha is the true body of Buddhahood; this true body is the primordial essence that, through practice and realization, will eventually transform into the Great Mirror Wisdom and the primordial essence of Thusness. While the seven great seeds are inherent in the Tathāgatagarbha, the karmic seeds arise from the mental constructions generated by the seven consciousness-minds. The same Tathāgatagarbha is utilized wondrously by Buddhas to benefit sentient beings, yet sentient beings misuse it for self-benefit, driven by greed, hatred and delusion.

9. The ālaya-vijñāna is the result of inconceivable perfuming

A sentient being's karmic seeds infuse their Tathāgatagarbha, resulting in the ālaya-vijñāna possessing the nature of arising and ceasing. This blend of arising and ceasing with the inherent non-arising and non-ceasing constitutes the ālaya-vijñāna. The process of inconceivable perfuming primarily involves the mano-āyatana. Once one engages in practice, this perfuming extends to both the mano-āyatana and the ālaya-vijñāna. If successful, this perfuming can lead to the transformation of ālaya-vijñāna into vipāka-vijñāna or even amala-vijñāna. The Tathāgatagarbha serves as the cause for the existence and operations of the seventh consciousness; the inconceivable perfuming of the Tathāgatagarbha is the cause for

direct perceiving consciousness, referring to the seventh consciousness, as everything the mano-āyatana perceives is experienced directly without conceptual awareness.

Segmented birth and death ceases at the eighth ground, the Immovable. Beyond this stage lies the inconceivable transformative birth and death. Bodhisattvas beyond the fourth ground possess the ability to manifest mind-made bodies—Manomayakāya. For Bodhisattvas at the first ground, if they practice both the Four Dhyānas and Eight Samādhis along with the transcendental powers —abhijñā—they can manifest up to one hundred mind-made bodies. Those at the second ground can manifest up to one thousand mind-made bodies if they practice the transcendental powers, while Bodhisattvas at the third ground can manifest ten thousand if they also engage in these practices. However, for a third ground Bodhisattva to advance to the fourth ground, the prerequisite is to practice the Four Dhyānas and Eight Samādhis. The process of manifesting mind-made bodies relies on volition from both the conscious mind and the mano-āyatana, with the latter playing a primary role. It involves the volition of the mano-āyatana, followed by the sixth consciousness engaging in attention, sensation, contact, perception and volition to bring forth the mind-made body. Bodhisattvas can manifest as many mind-made bodies as their wishes allow, though this ability is constrained for those below the eighth ground.

10.

The ālaya-vijñāna's nature is described as "pure yet stained" to capture its complex status. This term reflects a nuanced understanding of its essence: while the ālaya-vijñāna is inherently pure and free from defilement, its functional role as a storehouse consciousness leads to the accumulation of karmic seeds.

Purity and defilement are mutually exclusive; thus, they cannot coexist in their true forms. However, the functioning of ālaya-vijñāna complicates this understanding. As a storehouse consciousness, it accumulates and retains karmic seeds from the seven consciousnesses since beginningless time. Many of these

seeds stem from unwholesome actions, resulting in a collection of defiled karmic seeds. Additionally, ignorance in the mano-āyatana contributes to the generation of further defiled karmic actions, which are also stored in the ālaya-vijñāna.

Therefore, while the essence of the ālaya-vijñāna remains pure, its role in storing these countless defiled seeds leads to its characterization as "pure yet stained." This description acknowledges that the ālaya-vijñāna's fundamental purity is unaffected, despite its functional burden of accumulated defilements.

Chapter 8:
The No-Self Nature of Thusness

1.

Thusness as a concept encompasses two intricate meanings: the first signifies the true reality and immovability of Thusness, where Thusness refers to the essence dependent on the Tathāgatagarbha and is both the attribute and nature of the Tathāgatagarbha. The second denotes the essence of the true mind, parallel and equivalent to the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha. In the Buddha-realm, the amala-vijñāna is sometime regarded as synonymous with Thusness. In various scriptures, Thusness sometimes denotes either the primordial essence itself or the nature and attributes of the Tathāgatagarbha.

To fully understand the teachings, it is essential to distinguish between these two meanings. Identifying whether Thusness refers to the primordial essence or to its nature and attribute in different contexts will aid in comprehending the scriptures more thoroughly.

Some assert that Thusness is synonymous with Buddha. This confusion arises from a misunderstanding of the distinction between primordial essence and Buddha. Thusness, as a formless essence, represents the primordial essence or true reality—the intrinsic nature of Tathāgatagarbha. In contrast, a Buddha refers to an enlightened being with a physical body composed of the five skandhas. Thus, Thusness is not equivalent to a Buddha. Thusness is the true mind's intrinsic nature of suchness and immovability, while the true mind is the "true body" of becoming a Buddha. All sentient beings inherently possess a true mind, making Buddhahood attainable.

However, even if we refer to the true mind as Buddha, it does not recognize itself as such. It has no intrinsic self, is unaware of its true reality and remains oblivious to its own essence, which holds

the potential for Buddhahood. All names and definitions are human designations—it remains unconcerned with whether it becomes a Buddha. It is a mind that does not care.

The one who becomes a Buddha in the future is the mind of awareness. The sixth consciousness transforms into the Wisdom of Profound Insight, the seventh into the Wisdom of Equality, and the first five consciousnesses collectively transform into the Wisdom of Perfect Conduct. The Tathāgatagarbha transforms into the Great Mirror Wisdom. Together, these eight consciousnesses transform into wisdom, with ignorance fully eradicated, becoming the eight consciousnesses of wisdom that constitute a Buddha. Additionally, the five skandhas are no longer the same, including the sixth consciousness. The seventh consciousness remains unchanged, except that ignorance has been eradicated. The Great Mirror Wisdom, the amala-vijñāna, remains the same true mind, the Tathāgatagarbha, but its primordial essence is now free of ignorance from the seven consciousnesses and no longer stores defiled seeds; it will no longer be perfumed or transmuted.

The amala-vijñāna—the Buddha's mind, the mind of Permanence, Bliss, Self and Purity—gains an additional sixteen mental factors: the five particular mental factors (aspiration or wholesome desire, firm conviction, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom) and the eleven wholesome mental factors (faith, diligence, shame, remorse, non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion, repose, heedfulness, equanimity and nonviolence).

In the previous chapter, we mentioned that Thusness is formless. It cannot be seen by the eyes, heard by the ears, smelled by the nose, tasted by the tongue, touched by the body, and speculated by the conscious mind. However, it can be understood, cognized, sought, verified and realized. Once realized, the conscious mind continues to observe its functioning, recognizes its characteristics and nature, and comprehends the seeds it contains and stores, noting its pure, unconditioned, and conditioned aspects, as well as its perpetual and unceasing nature.

The true reality of Thusness is reflected in its Consummate Nature—Pariniṣpanna-svabhāva of the true mind. Consummate nature refers to the true mind's ability to thoroughly accomplish all

dharmas in both mundane and supramundane realms. Within the true mind lies the self-nature of the seven great seeds: earth, water, fire, wind, space, perceiving and consciousness. These seven great seeds enable the Tathāgatagarbha to manifest a sentient being's rebirth body, dependent living environment, their five skandhas, and physical universe, along with the first six consciousnesses of Dependent Nature—Paratantra-svabhāva—and the seventh consciousness of Imagined Nature—Parikalpita-svabhāva. This capacity fully fulfills a sentient being's karmic fruits and allows wholesome karmic seeds to be stored through wholesome practice, ultimately leading to liberation and Buddhahood.

The cycle of samsara and liberation, along with the myriad dharmas in the three realms of existence, are fulfilled by the true mind of Thusness, affirming that its primordial essence is authentically real and its functioning genuine, which earns it the name "mind of true reality." In this respect, we refute the notion that the true mind is merely a concept without real essence. Some argue that the true mind, being formless, amounts to nothingness, and thus its primordial essence cannot exist due to its lack of physical form. This is a deeply ingrained fallacy difficult to disprove.

Ordinary sentient beings often equate essence with physical form and shape, believing that without these, a primordial essence cannot exist. The formless and shapeless nature of the true mind is inconceivable to those lacking wisdom, as they only recognize the existence of physical forms in the mundane world. It is important to understand that, unlike conditioned dharmas, which manifest only within the three realms of existence, the true mind resides in the supramundane realm.

Although the true mind lacks phenomena in the three realms of existence, it continues to exist with real essence and true functionings, thus proving its authentic reality. All those who are awakened realize this, understand where it resides, and comprehend how it works with the five skandhas. This signifies that the true mind is a real existence. Furthermore, the Buddha said that this real essence makes attaining Buddhahood possible for sentient beings.

In summary, the primordial essence of Thusness is real because it possesses the six inherent nature of the great seeds of earth,

water, fire, wind, space and consciousness. It has both a storing nature and a storehouse nature, as well as the appropriating nature grasped by the seventh consciousness. The true mind brings forth myriad dharmas, and its essence possesses infinite characteristics and functionings. These further affirm its true reality and the existence of a real essence transcending mundane form. Although the primordial essence of Thusness is difficult to comprehend, recognizing its existence is essential. Through "cānchán," we can search for it, and through this practice, we can subsequently understand and illuminate the false mind, thus making it possible to verify and realize the true mind.

2.

"The intrinsic suchness (rúrú) nature of Thusness"***** refers to the nature and attribute of the true mind, distinct from the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha. The term "ru" signifies truthfulness, alignment with principle, accord with Dharma and immovability. This means the mind remains unshaken by external phenomena, staying in its original condition and state. Thusness has the ability to manifest the virtues of all dharmas truthfully, presenting how phenomena in the mundane world should manifest and delivering karmic fruits in alignment with the conditions of karmic seeds. It neither disrupts nor misplaces causes and conditions. When rewarding karmic fruits, its primordial essence remains undisturbed by the results it delivers.

[*The Chinese expression and its underlying connotation for "rúrú nature of Thusness" are difficult to convey in a few words in English. The Chinese characters are "眞如的如如性" (zhēnrú de rúrú xìng). Some translators render "zhēnrú" and "rúrú" as "Thusness" or "Suchness," with some referring to "zhēnrú " as "true Thusness." These phrases appear interchangeable and are quite prevalent in some contemporary teachings and commentaries in Chinese.

In the *Diamond Sutra*'s Sanskrit version, Bhūtatathatā is translated as "眞如性" (zhenru xìng) or "the nature of true Thusness." A Sanskrit dictionary shows that all connotations and definitions for "Bhū" point to mundane affairs, which matches the given interpretation. The

Chinese Buddhist Dictionary defines “zhēn” as true, and “rú” as [things] as they are: “the nature of all dharmas, in the absence of illusion, is true [nature], while things that are abiding, unchanging and unmoving are Thusness.” As for “rúrú,” it can be interpreted as an adjective derived from a compound verb (rúrú) commonly seen in *Prajñāpāramitā Sutras* and various śāstras to describe the immovability and unchanging nature of reality, Emptiness and Prajñā. “rú” as a verb contains meanings of abiding, conformity, going, and (something) as a result. In Chinese, the same word can be used twice in certain phrases to emphasize the ultimate, the extreme, or the significance of something. In such cases, the first character acts as a comparative preposition.

In the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*, Vimalakīrti tells Maitreya Bodhisattva that “enlightenment is without duality” [3.52]. This is from the version translated by Robert A. F. Thurman, who used the Tibetan version for his translation. In the Chinese version, “enlightenment” in that paragraph is “rú”—“Thusness is neither one nor different” (如者不二不異), where the second character is a morphological change to make “rú” a noun. Lastly, in both Pali and Sanskrit, the phrase yathābhūta refers to something truly as it is, in conformity with the truth (the Vipassana teacher Goenka used it frequently to describe reality.) Despite the lack of further research and comparison with various sutras in Sanskrit and Chinese, I am inclined to think that yathābhūta is the word translated into “rúrú”.

Final note: In this chapter, “rúrú” as an adjective is used many times to express the immovability of Thusness, and sometimes I simplified it to “immovable” or “immovability,” depending on the sentence structure. As for “rúrú xìng,” it is rendered as “intrinsic nature of suchness.”]

The true mind does not experience emotions such as pain or frustration when a sentient being undergoes karmic fruit like blindness, deafness, muteness or rebirth in the lower realms. It remains indifferent to these outcomes, feeling neither regret nor shame for manifesting such phenomena. Similarly, when rewarding wholesome karmic fruit, it does not feel joy or pride in the results, nor does it claim any merit. It is unaware of these emotions. Even when one attains liberation through practice, the true mind does not think, “I am finally liberated,” because it has never been bound, nor has it engaged in practice. When one attains Buddhahood, the true mind does not claim to have ascended to the Jewel Seat of

Buddha. It does not become a Buddha or take the fruition of Buddhahood, nor does it become a sentient being—yet it is neither non-sentient nor non-Buddha. Without it, nothing exists.

When we see forms and arise feelings of like or dislike, the true mind perceives no form and thus experiences no aversion or craving. When we hear pleasant music and feel joy, or hear harsh words and feel hatred, the true mind hears none of these sounds and evokes no emotional response. Even when entering deep samādhi, finding ease and joy in both mind and body, the true mind remains as it always is, unaffected by these sensations. When the true mind manifests a sublime Buddha-realm, it does not perceive the wondrous splendor of the realm; it remains calm and undisturbed. Throughout its manifestation of any phenomena in the three realms of existence, the true mind has never experienced emotions such as joy, anger, sadness and happiness. It remains unmoved, unaware of the worlds it has created, and lacking perception or feeling.

The true mind's intrinsic suchness reflects its truthfulness in fulfilling karmic fruits. It is impartial and devoid of selfishness, never thinking, "I manifested this sentient being's five skandhas, so I should not record their unwholesome karma to prevent them from suffering bad karmic fruit." Likewise, when karmic conditions ripen, it does not avoid delivering unwholesome karmic seeds to spare sentient beings from suffering. It does not contemplate avoiding the manifestation of animal bodies, hell bodies or incomplete forms.

The true mind always truthfully and impartially handles karmic causes and fruits, be they wholesome, unwholesome or neutral. It consistently records and actualizes the appropriate fruits without disrupting or miscalculating causes and conditions.

3.

The immovable Thusness refers to the true mind, which abides by the fundamental principle of non-abiding and possesses an intrinsic immovable essence. The mind of Thusness does not correspond to the phenomena of the six sensory realms. It does not arise any thoughts toward them and does not depend on them because it lacks the six sense faculties and six consciousnesses.

Thus, it is absent from seeing, hearing, perceiving and awareness. It does not experience emotions of joy, anger, sadness or happiness in response to forms, remaining unmoved when encountering them. Without ears, it does not hear; without a nose, it does not smell; without a tongue, it does not taste; without a body, it does not touch; and without a mind, it is not aware of mental objects. By not following the movements of the six sensory realms, it remains immovably steadfast when facing myriad dharmas, whether good or bad, and regardless of karmic actions and conducts.

In contrast, our six consciousness-minds always correspond to and cognize the six sensory realms. Cognition involves differentiation, and differentiation entails movement, which subsequently leads to karmic actions of body, speech and mind. This is the nature of the six consciousnesses.

Studying and practicing the Buddha way involves transforming the six consciousnesses to diminish their grip on emotions such as joy and anger. As the six consciousnesses develop their power of concentration, their coarse differentiations lessen, and their movements become more stable and slower. However, they can never completely release their hold on the six sensory realms or remain entirely unmoved, as this is their inherent nature. We, as sentient beings, rely on this differentiating nature to navigate and live in the mundane world.

4.

The Sixth Patriarch's statement, "Who could have expected that one's essence could be changeless and immovable?" points to the true nature of the mind—the Tathāgatagarbha—which remains immovable and unchanging, even as it manifests all dharmas. The Tathāgatagarbha's self-nature produces all phenomena in accordance with karmic conditions without altering its pure, intrinsic nature. It is always accompanied by the seventh consciousness and its mental formations, yet it does not move in response to phenomena, nor does it generate thoughts or afflictions. Despite its abiding presence alongside the seventh consciousness,

the Tathāgatagarbha remains unmoved and unchanged while aligning with karmic conditions.

Immovability refers to the fact that the Tathāgatagarbha does not react to phenomena with thoughts or perceptions. It remains completely unaffected by any dharma. It cognizes the seventh consciousness' mental factors—such as attention and volition—without becoming entangled in the three poisons of greed, anger and delusion. After cognizing the mental formations of the seventh consciousness, it complies and brings forth the five skandhas, the three-thousandfold universe, and produces all dharmas according to those karmic formations, without ever exerting volition or control. In this way, the Tathāgatagarbha manifests all dharmas while remaining still and free of subjective views or intentions.

Though it consistently abides by karmic seeds and works in harmony with the seventh consciousness to bring forth all dharmas, the Tathāgatagarbha does not experience any coming or going. It has been present since beginningless time, without form or boundaries, pervading all places and times. Because it contains all dharmas within itself, the idea of movement—coming or going—does not apply to it. Movement would imply arising and ceasing, but the Tathāgatagarbha is beyond both. It neither arises nor ceases, and thus, there is no coming from anywhere nor going to anywhere. This timeless, formless nature of non-arising and non-ceasing embodies the essence of the term "Thus come," a hallmark of the Tathāgata—the Buddha.

5.

The Tathāgatagarbha is devoid of the concept of "self." It lacks the notion of a real, true self or mind and does not possess understanding or perspective. While our five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena are produced and manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha, they are not real. Things that change, arise and cease are impermanent. Therefore, dharmas dependent on origination are unreliable and illusory. Only by realizing this, breaking free from views of self and no-self, and verifying the first fruition can one transcend the three bondages: belief in a self,

skeptical doubt, and attachment to rites and rituals. This realization leads to liberation from the three lower realms. In future lives, one may be reborn in human form and bear only some negative karmic fruits. However, upon attaining the fourth fruition of Arhatship, some may enter the full extinction of existence upon death and be temporarily free from the cycle of birth and death within the three realms of existence.

6.

Dharmas encompass both material phenomena and principles that exist in the mundane and supramundane worlds. These include objects, principle-substance, reasoning, ideology and connotations that can be cognized, sensed, perceived and differentiated by the seven consciousnesses. Dharmas are varied, consisting of both tangible and intangible, true and false, dependent-originated and non-dependent-originated forms, as well as conditioned and unconditioned forms. They include material dharmas made of the four great seeds, conceptual and ideological mental formations, vast phenomena such as the universe, empty space and the boundless dharmas from various Buddha-realms in the ten directions, the smallest entities that cannot be seen with the eyes, dharmas perceivable by foolish sentient beings in the three lower realms, and those known only by the All-encompassing Wisdom—Anantajñāna—and the Supreme Wisdom—Asamasamajñāna—possessed by Buddhas.

All dharmas, except for the amala-vijñāna, Thusness, or the Great Mirror Wisdom, possess the true and perpetual nature of Self; the rest do not. For sentient beings, it is a fundamental truth that all dharmas are without self. Yet the Self is real; it is not produced by conditions, is non-arising and non-ceasing, unchanging and untransmutable. It is free from suffering, pure and unstained, unbroken and unceasing, characterized by Permanence, Bliss, Self and Purity.

Although sentient beings' true minds are inherently non-arising and non-ceasing, their Tathāgatagarbhas still contain arising, ceasing and transmuting karmic seeds, and therefore it is not yet a

complete self. It lacks the nature of self because it does not possess self-recognition and is unaware of its own existence. In contrast, the mano-āyatana and mano-vijñāna, which continually perceive their own existence, grasp at self-interest, and engage in self-promotion and self-praise, the Tathāgatagarbha has none of these characteristics.

Myriad dharmas are without self, which includes the no-self of persons—pudgalanairātmya—and the no-self of all dharmas—dharmanairātmya. The nature of no-self is one of the key aspects verified through the selflessness of all dharmas, as understood by Mahayana practitioners. The no-self of persons refers to the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena, as attained by Arhats according to the teachings in the *Āgama Sutras*.

Upon examining the five skandhas, we see that the form skandha is born from nothing into becoming, with arising and ceasing, and thus it is not a self; the sensation skandha changes with a flux of thoughts streaming continually, and thus it is not a self; the perception skandha encompasses the characteristics of the form and sensation skandhas; the mental formations skandha arises, ceases and transmutes, and is short-lived, thus it is not a self; the consciousness skandha arises, ceases, changes and moves kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa, manifesting both arising and ceasing concurrently, and hence it is not a self.

This examination reveals that the five skandhas are dependent-originated and do not constitute a self.

A closer look at the eighteen realms of phenomena reveals that the first five sense faculties also emerge from nothingness to existing, and from existing to ceasing. They are ungraspable and thus not a self. The sixth sense faculty (mano-āyatana) streams the consciousness seeds continuously, arising and ceasing kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa. Even when an Arhat enters the nirvanic state, these seeds can be extinguished, indicating that they are not a self. The six consciousnesses, which are part of the consciousness skandha, change, arise and cease; therefore, they are not a self. The six sensory realms arise from nothingness into existing and then return to nothingness, constantly arising and ceasing according to conditions, which further emphasizes that they are not a self.

Finally, the eighteen realms of phenomena arise and cease according to conditions and are impermanent and changeable, reaffirming that they are not a self.

This summarizes the no-self of persons for the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena. The concept that "dharmas are without self" in Hinayana teaching means that there is no self within the arising of all dharmas, which results from the interdependent combination of the five skandhas, the six sense bases, the twelve sense bases, and the eighteen realms of phenomena.

For example, the eyes see forms, the ears hear sounds, the six sense faculties come into contact with the six sensory realms, and our daily physical activities such as walking, sitting, lying down, wearing clothes, eating meals, talking, laughing and performing good or bad deeds, as well as our mental activities of all seven consciousness-minds, such as contemplating, understanding, analyzing and studying, are not real. They arise and cease according to conditions, and their nature is impermanent, transmuting and short-lived. All these dharmas lack the nature of a self and therefore have no self.

In Mahayana practice, the teaching of no-self of persons and no-self of dharmas is understood through the lens of the Tathāgatagarbha. This involves observing the illusory and unreal nature of the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena. By examining how all dharmas arise from causes and conditions—specifically, the interdependent combination of the five skandhas, the twelve sense bases and the eighteen realms of phenomena—it becomes clear that these are merely functionings and characteristics manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha and lack intrinsic substance. This understanding incorporates the Hinayana teaching on no-self of persons and no-self of dharmas, recognizing that the Tathāgatagarbha itself is without self and that the appropriating nature of the seven consciousness-minds and the phenomena of the six sensory realms that are being grasped are inherently empty. Furthermore, the empty self of persons in the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena refers to the karmic seeds that the Tathāgatagarbha delivers, enabling the five

skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena to maintain all functions and activities.

The no-self nature of the Tathāgatagarbha reflects the arising and ceasing nature of the karmic seeds it stores. These seeds are perpetually in flux, resulting in a constant, unreal and transmuting state, and thus represent an incomplete self. Additionally, it reflects that the Tathāgatagarbha does not possess self-awareness or a governing nature.

In contrast, the seventh consciousness perceives itself as a self that governs and treats all dharmas as a self. The five skandhas, though appearing to have the nature of a self, are ultimately a false self. Only the Tathāgatagarbha is the true Self—yet it lacks any notion of self. It is important to recognize that the notion of the Tathāgatagarbha having a true Self is a construct we impose.

The manifestation of all dharmas is the interdependent phenomena of the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena, which result from the upholding-maintaining of the functioning of the Tathāgatagarbha. Without the Tathāgatagarbha, these dharmas would not exist and are thus illusory, lacking an intrinsic self. It is the five skandhas-body that erroneously perceives phenomena as having an independent self.

Realizing a small portion of no-self in all dharmas signifies the attainment of Path Wisdom for a Bodhisattva. When one enters the first ground of the Bodhisattva Path, one realizes the no-self of a hundred dharmas, akin to the attainment of Mirror-like Contemplation. In the second ground, one realizes the no-self of a thousand dharmas, akin to the attainment of Light-and-Shadow Contemplation. In the third ground, one realizes the no-self of innumerable dharmas, which serves as a testament to highly advanced Wisdom. Ultimately, the infinite and boundless connotations of complete no-self in all dharmas can only be attained by Buddhas, who possess the ultimate, perfect, and supreme wisdom —the Great Mirror Wisdom.

In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra*, the Buddha describes the amala-vijñāna in the Buddha-realm as permanent, blissful, self and pure. Permanence signifies that the amala-vijñāna is thoroughly

complete, with all karmic seeds having ceased manifesting phenomena of arising, ceasing and transmuting. Self denotes that the amala-vijñāna encompasses twenty-one mental factors and has transformed into the true Self.

“All Buddhas embody complete no-self” refers to their seven consciousness-minds having reached the ultimate completeness of no-self. Prior to this state, there remains a residual aspect of self in Bodhisattvas, and they have yet to attain Buddhahood. When the notion of self is completely exhausted, they become Buddhas. Consciousness-mind has the self-verifying aspect and capacity for self-reflection and embodies the nature of a self. Therefore, the amala-vijñāna, being able to verify its own existence and self-reflect, is said to possess the nature of self.

The concept of no-self of persons and no-self of all dharmas is central to the practice of Śrāvakas. While they may acknowledge the existence of the true Self, they are generally unable to realize it. In contrast, heretics assert that all dharmas are empty, unreal and devoid of self, rejecting the existence of the true Self.

Chapter 9:
The UnImpeding and the Nature of Non-Abiding

1.

How is the Tathāgatagarbha unimpeded?* It lacks the six sense faculties and does not come into contact with the six sensory realms; therefore, it does not generate mental formations. Free from the afflictions of the three poisons, it does not create karma that perpetuates the cycle of samsara. Without eyes, it sees no forms and thus cannot be deluded or bound by them; without ears, it hears no sounds, making it unaffected by praise or criticism and free from the three poisons. By having no six sense faculties, it remains immovable and unimpeded by the phenomena of the six sensory realms.

[*I choose the word "unimpeding" for the Chinese term "zìzai" (自在), which is often translated as "ease," "at ease," or "free and unrestrained," diverging from its original Sanskrit connotations. Widely used in sutras, śāstras and Zen scriptures, this term has gained a unique significance in Chinese that adds depth but may also create challenges for translators unfamiliar with the original Sanskrit term when translating Buddhist texts from Chinese to English. While this shift from its Sanskrit roots may obscure its original meaning for modern translators, it enriches the term's cultural and philosophical context within Chinese Buddhism.

The Sanskrit word "īśvara," meaning a god or supreme being with transcendental capabilities, is often equated with the Chinese term "zìzai." A key example is the translation of "Avalokiteśvara," which Kumārajīva rendered as "Guānshìyīn" (觀世音, translating "Avalokita," as Thich Nhat Hanh referred to it), while Xuanzang translated it as "Guānzìzai" (觀自在, "Aveśvara") in the *Heart Sutra*. In Sanskrit grammar rules, the vowels "a" and "i" combine to form "e" when joining compound words—hence "Avalokiteśvara."

We might interpret "Guānshìyīn" as representing compassion—attentively listening to the cries of suffering beings—while "Guānzìzai" emphasizes great wisdom. By practicing the profound Prajñāpāramitā and clearly perceiving that the five skandhas are inherently empty, she is unimpeded by samsaric phenomena, thus fulfilling her great Bodhisattva Vow.

In the *Avataṃsaka Sutra* and other texts, the Buddha mentions two, four, five, eight, and ten kinds of unimpeded powers attained by Bodhisattvas. The Sanskrit term "vaśitā" is translated as "zìzai" in Chinese and "mastery" in English (e.g., the ten masteries of Bodhisattvas). By comparing various scriptures and translations, it becomes apparent that "īśvara" refers to beings such as Avalokiteśvara and Maheśvara, whereas "vaśitā" denotes qualities cultivated through deep practice of the Six Pāramitās. In this context, the word "zìzai" often encapsulates both meanings: being "at ease" and possessing the "vaśitā" developed through profound attainment.]

Are our seven consciousness-minds unimpeded by the six sensory realms? Not at all! Our eyes are obscured when we see forms; our ears are caught when we hear sounds; when we smell, taste, or touch something, we are impeded. Our seven consciousness-minds cannot escape the six sensory realms. Seeing forms, we are stuck; hearing sounds, we are stuck; smelling fragrances, we are stuck; tasting delicious food, we are stuck; touching objects, we are stuck; perceiving phenomena, we are stuck. While the Tathāgatagarbha is not deluded and remains unattached to all of these, it is truly unimpeded.

The aforementioned passage describes the characteristics of the Tathāgatagarbha. Once we awaken to our true mind, we can fundamentally transform it into the pure mind by deeply studying these characteristics. Even before awakening, understanding these qualities can be valuable. By reflecting on the pure characteristics of the Tathāgatagarbha while perfuming our body, speech and mind, we can learn from them and incorporate some of these qualities into our lives. This practice can help mitigate the influence of the three poisons. Although it may not constitute true transformation, persistently cultivating and perfuming our minds in this way can still yield meaningful and significant benefits.

2.

What exactly is the "Aveśvara" Bodhisattva? There are two types of Bodhisattvas: the true Bodhisattva and the false Bodhisattva. The true Bodhisattva refers to the non-arising and non-ceasing primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha, who meticulously, diligently and perpetually cares for the Bodhisattva's five skandhas-body. In contrast, the false Bodhisattva represents the arising and ceasing nature of the five skandhas-body.

Unimpeding also has two aspects. One is the unimpeding nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, which does not rely on any dharma but exists independently, lacking nothing, and is non-arising and non-ceasing. The other is the unimpeding nature of the five skandhas-body; when a five skandhas-body is liberated, it is unimpeded; otherwise, it is impeded.

This "Aveśvara" Bodhisattva, who possesses a five skandhas-body, has profound powers of concentration and wisdom. She can freely observe and contemplate profound teachings and principles, and she is able to observe the essence of her true mind at any time. We call this unimpeding. However, realizing the true mind is the prerequisite for such profound and subtle observation. She can observe how the essence of the true mind operates and how it cooperates with the five skandhas to manifest myriad dharmas. Moreover, she can observe how the true minds of sentient beings in the six realms operate, manifest, and how their skandhas coordinate with this operation and manifestation. This is unimpeding.

Her mind is unimpeded, free from constraints by the five skandhas and myriad dharmas; furthermore, her mind does not crave or cling to them. She is also able to observe all sentient beings' true minds, recognizing that they, too, inherently exist independently, not dependently originated or reliant on external conditions. True mind is unimpeding; when false minds are not attached to form, nor grasp at anything, or are stained by myriad dharmas, they too can be unimpeded.

When a Bodhisattva reaches this stage of unimpeding, her five skandhas-body can freely travel to any Buddha-realm in the ten directions, and she can manifest her mind-made body according to

conditions. This is an incomparable unimpeded nature. She can even manifest a billion-fold great universe without needing to engage her attention in first accumulating virtuous actions. Again, the prerequisite is that she must attain the unimpeded mind first; this unimpeded mind is the Tathāgatagarbha, the ālaya-vijñāna. She is capable of manifesting infinite transcendental powers: “In whatever form beings can be saved, that form is manifested to expound the Dharma.” She can freely manifest any form-bodies of the four noble realms and six ordinary realms. This is great unimpeded nature, and the prerequisite is that she must practice the profound Prajñāpāramitā and attain profound Prajñā, realizing an unimpeded mind that is of great ease.

3.

Mind exists as it is, independent of external conditions—this is the only Dharma that does not depend on any conditions. Regardless of conditions, it is always non-arising and non-ceasing, denoting the mind of true reality. Everything else is dependently originated; when conditions are ripe, they arise and cease, inherently unstable and illusory. As condition-bound dharmas, they lack self-nature and are incapable of self-determination.

The mind of true reality possesses self-nature and real essence. It is unimpeding and does not arise from any dharma. Free from causes and conditions, and due to its non-arising and non-ceasing nature, nothing can constrain its existence. Dependently originated dharmas have no intrinsic self, while non-dependently originated ones possess self-nature. Dependent-originated dharmas arise due to conditions; if this arises, that arises, and all manifestations from these arisings lack intrinsic self, thus they are not the Middle Way. Conversely, that which is not produced and exists on its own possesses self-nature and represents the Middle Way.

All dharmas in the mundane world are produced by the mind of true reality. They arise as a result of dependent origination, indicating that the mind of true reality exists before all myriad dharmas and phenomena. The mind does not depend on any phenomena for its existence; however, to find it, we must search for

it amidst the phenomena. Departing from the phenomena, as well as from the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena, will prevent us from finding the mind, for the operations of these phenomena indicate that the mind is also in operation. If the mind were to depart, phenomena would cease immediately, and the five skandhas-body would become a corpse. For this reason, in our "cānchán", we seek this mind by contemplating the phenomena of the six sensory realms, the activities of the five skandhas, and the interactions between the six sense faculties and the six sensory realms. As our wisdom and concentration increase, and when the time and conditions are ripe, we will be able to realize this mind of true reality.

4.

In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha told Subhūti, "the mind arises that [does not respond to phenomena and] does not abide in anything." This mind refers to the self-nature pure mind—the Tathāgatagarbha. Some mistakenly interpret this as referring to the conscious mind that refrains from dwelling in or responding to all dharmas. However, realization is not about training our conscious mind to be non-abiding in phenomena; this is not the awakening to the true mind. Whether we grasp the abiding or non-abiding aspect of the conscious mind, it has nothing to do with the Prajñā of the Tathāgatagarbha. The conscious mind becomes non-abiding only when it is extinguished; as long as it persists, it remains attached to mental objects. If the conscious mind is unaware of these objects, it neither knows that it is non-abiding nor recognizes its state of samādhi. In this sense, if the conscious mind becomes aware that it is in samādhi, it knows non-abiding and thus, paradoxically, abides in this state of non-abiding.

Awakening is awakening to the self-nature pure mind. When the Sixth Patriarch Huineng heard the Fifth Patriarch Hongren expounding the *Diamond Sutra*, he awakened to this non-abiding pure mind. The phrase "the mind arises that does not abide in anything" does not refer to a mind that suddenly enters a non-abiding state, where it feels reposeful and thus becomes the true

mind, thereby reaching a state of awakening. If this were the case, then if the mind were to become restless and attach itself to something once more, the awakened state would vanish. Consequently, the Sixth Patriarch would not have truly awakened to the non-abiding self-nature pure mind.

However, we know that the Sixth Patriarch truly awakened to this non-abiding self-nature pure mind. This pure mind is inherently non-abiding; it does not require any practice to make it non-abide, as it naturally does not dwell in any phenomena. In contrast, the seven consciousnesses always dwell in something as long as they exist; they correspond to and engage with the perception of sensory phenomena. If they did not dwell in these phenomena, they would not be able to cognize or perceive them; once they do cognize or perceive, they are dwelling in those phenomena. For example, if two hands are touching, and they were non-abiding, they would not be in contact. Therefore, we refer to contact as abiding. If this were not the case, the body consciousness and mind consciousness (mano-vijñāna) would not recognize that the two hands are touching. When faculties, sensory realms, and consciousnesses come into contact, consciousnesses come to know the six sensory realms, and this awareness arises only after contact with the sensory realms. This awareness is differentiation and is the result of abiding in the mental objects.

5.

A Buddha, too, possesses eight consciousnesses, which are always functioning. Do a Buddha's eight consciousnesses abide or not abide? Abiding suggests contact, while non-abiding indicates that the mind remains unconcerned, neither dwelling in nor grasping phenomena. As long as the seven consciousnesses exist, they differentiate the six sensory realms through contact; once contact occurs, they dwell on the mental objects of these realms. However, for those engaged in practice, though their minds make contact with and differentiate the six sensory realms, they do not cling to or concern themselves with them. This is what some define as non-abiding, an aspiration in our practice.

The Tathāgatagarbha has cognition, but it does not differentiate the six sensory realms, and therefore, it does not dwell in them. It does not generate thoughts or attachments to the six sensory realms, making it the true and authentic non-abiding mind. Yet, its consciousness seeds are generated kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa, allowing for continuous operation. This is the principle of the non-abiding mind that arises but does not abide in anything.

Both Buddhas and sentient beings possess eight consciousnesses, with the primary function of these consciousnesses being cognition and differentiation. The first seven consciousnesses differentiate the six sensory realms, while the Tathāgatagarbha differentiates content of a different nature. Specifically, the Tathāgatagarbha distinguishes a sentient being's rebirth body, the dependent living environment and their karmic seeds. When it comes into contact with these, it takes hold and differentiates them, leading to the arising of mental formations and volition. This process results in the creation of the rebirth body and the dependent living environment in which the sentient being resides, while also delivering their karmic seeds and fulfilling their karmic fruits. In this sense, the Tathāgatagarbha abides; otherwise, it would not be able to come into contact with a sentient being's karmic seeds, rebirth body and dependent living environment, nor could it differentiate, pervade and illuminate all dharmas. Thus, we say that the Tathāgatagarbha abides in but does not abide in the phenomena of the six sensory realms.

A Buddha's first seven wisdom-consciousnesses also come into contact with the six sensory realms. Once contact and differentiation occur, these consciousnesses abide in the six sensory realms. However, the manner in which they abide is significantly different from what we typically understand. The wisdom-consciousnesses engage with the six sensory realms yet remain unconcerned by them. They do not perceive them as real phenomena, nor do they give rise to craving or grasping; they abide without leaving any trace of abiding.

A mind that is concerned with the six sensory realms is a mind that dwells within them. This is how ordinary beings' seven consciousness-minds function, shaping their mental formations. In

contrast, a mind that is unconcerned with the six sensory realms is non-abiding—a state attainable only through deep practice on the Buddha Way. Therefore, the non-abiding commonly referred to by ordinary people is when their minds are simply not concerned with the six sensory realms. Bodhisattva Mahāsattvas, Arhats and Buddhas, too, are unconcerned with the six sensory realms, yet they embody both abiding and non-abiding.

6.

Achieving a non-abiding mind is not merely about refraining from differentiating when the six consciousnesses engage with the six sensory realms. Non-differentiation is simply a method for practicing concentration and taming afflictions. To truly align with wisdom, we must deeply contemplate the illusory and unreal nature of the phenomena arising from the six sensory realms when the six sense faculties engage with them. We need to recognize that these phenomena are mere shadows manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha—reflections and illusions in the mirror of the Tathāgatagarbha, belonging to it and its nature, rather than being real phenomena. Cultivating this clear understanding is what we refer to as right mindfulness—smṛti. This mindfulness enables us to align with the wisdom of true reality, break free from the bondage of phenomena, and ultimately liberate our mind.

A non-abiding mind represents the culmination of our practice. When we reach this final stage, our seven consciousness-minds are transformed to become as pure as the Tathāgatagarbha, and we attain the rank of Mahayana non-learning yogis. However, those who study the Buddha Way but find that their grasping and afflictions do not diminish, and whose attachment to mundane dharmas deepens, become ensnared by these very grasping and afflictions. This indicates that they have lost sight of their study of the Buddhadharma and the cultivation of their Bodhi Mind, becoming entangled in their clinging to mundane dharmas.

7.

Non-abiding in the six sensory realms does not affect their differentiation but rather involves leaving no trace after differentiating. This may be the most comprehensive teaching on "the mind arises that [does not respond to phenomena and] does not abide in anything." Since all phenomena of the six sensory realms are mirror reflections of the Tathāgatagarbha, a wise person understands that it is impossible to abide in the reflection. Thus, abiding is, in essence, non-abiding. For those who have awakened to their true mind, they can rely on the non-abiding nature of the Tathāgatagarbha. My question is: Does "the mind which does not abide in anything" refer to the state pre- or post-awakening?

"Respond" means that when the Tathāgatagarbha responds to conditions to manifest myriad dharmas, it does not dwell in these conditions nor myriad dharmas. Our seven consciousnesses should learn from the Tathāgatagarbha's ability to respond yet remain non-abiding. This is the essence of "responding."

In the context of the seven consciousnesses, "not abiding in" refers to the state achieved after awakening. In contrast, the Tathāgatagarbha's non-abiding nature applies both in the state of awakening and the post-awakening state. Once one awakens to this non-abiding mind, it signifies that they have awakened to their true mind. After awakening, one observes through the operation of the five skandhas-body and mind on how the Tathāgatagarbha manifests the five skandhas-body with its non-abiding nature and upholds the six sensory realms with this same nature. This observation helps the seven consciousness-minds understand the state of the pure mind, which is gradually being perfumed by the Tathāgatagarbha. Over time, this gradual process loosens their attachment to the phenomena of the six sensory realms and purifies their minds to align with the state of non-abiding. Thus, the minds are transformed to reflect the Tathāgatagarbha's pure and non-abiding nature. True transformation occurs only after awakening. The notion that one can mentally awaken, then transform the Tathāgatagarbha, and finally achieve awakening is a fallacy. There is

no process of mental awakening, transforming and then achieving realization.

8.

There are two meanings to "the mind arises that [does not respond to phenomena and] does not abide in anything."

The first meaning highlights the fundamental principle that the Tathāgatagarbha's self-nature does not dwell in any dharmas, yet it continuously arising its mind outwardly. This manifestation of arising signifies the ability to produce and transform myriad dharmas, reflecting the primordial characteristics of Thusness.

The second meaning concerns how our false minds (seven consciousness-minds), can and should learn from the Tathāgatagarbha's non-abiding nature. We should observe how the Tathāgatagarbha does not dwell in any dharmas while still operating within them. Similarly, as we engage with the five skandhas-body and study both mundane dharmas and Buddhadharma, we should follow the Tathāgatagarbha's example of not abiding in all dharmas.

To align our false minds with the Tathāgatagarbha's non-abiding self-nature, it is essential to practice and become imbued with its essence for us to realize the Thusness. This process allows us to gradually perceive its pure nature, leading our five skandhas to slowly align with it. By practicing the Bodhisattva Path with a non-abiding mind, we emulate its example in both mundane and supramundane activities. In constructing conditioned dharmas, we learn not to cling to their forms, thereby embodying the Tathāgatagarbha's essence in our daily conduct as we practice the Bodhisattva Path.

In relation to the Tathāgatagarbha's self-nature, understanding all perceptive phenomena of dharmas involves becoming deeply imbued with its essence. Before realizing our true mind, this process may resemble a form of abiding. At this stage, our minds have not yet fully transformed to align with the Tathāgatagarbha's self-nature in constructing conditioned dharmas within the mundane

world. This period involves being perfumed by the essence of the Tathāgatagarbha.

Once we awaken to our true mind, we can directly and authentically perceive its operation and learn from it through observation. This insight allows our minds to gradually transform, reaching a state where "the mind arises yet does not abide in anything." The arising of the mind signifies that when the minds of the seven consciousness-minds arise, the mundane dharmas in the three realms of existence are in operation.

The Tathāgatagarbha's self-nature also involves the arising of its mind. The term "arising its mind" signifies that the Tathāgatagarbha continuously produces conditioned dharmas in the three realms of existence, reflecting its self-nature's capacity for mental formations. The five universal mental factors represent the Tathāgatagarbha's mental formations, through which it creates all perceptive phenomena of mundane dharmas without abiding in them. This encapsulates the meaning of "the mind arises yet does not abide in anything" in both conventional and fundamental terms. Addressing both aspects is crucial, as focusing solely on the fundamental principle may make it difficult for ordinary people to comprehend.

9.

The "mind" that arises is the true mind, the Tathāgatagarbha. The Tathāgatagarbha does not abide in any dharma, and thus, no thoughts arise from it. Its five universal mental factors operate perpetually, delivering the seven great seeds and karmic seeds, bringing forth the five skandhas-body and all phenomena in the mundane world.

The arising mind involves two aspects: one pertains to the operation of its mental factors, which do not dwell in the phenomena of the six sensory realms; the other refers to the continuous stream of consciousness seeds, enabling the Tathāgatagarbha to operate without interruption. Even an Arhat, in the nirvanic state of full extinction, continues to have consciousness seeds streaming out. These seeds will eventually produce the same

Arhat's mano-āyatana, which will then coordinate with its own operation to generate the five skandhas-body and the eighteen realms of phenomena, leading to rebirth in the three realms of existence.

Chapter 10:
The Empty Nature of All Dharmas and the Tathāgatagarbha

1.

The Tathāgatagarbha, as described in the *Heart Sutra*, embodies both Emptiness and Becoming, along with aspects of being neither empty nor becoming. To grasp the true intrinsic nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, one must understand both its empty and becoming characteristics. A thorough study of these two facets is essential for a comprehensive understanding.

The empty aspect of the Tathāgatagarbha refers to its primordial essence, which is devoid of mundane characteristics* and is itself a formless form. As the *Heart Sutra* states, the Tathāgatagarbha lacks eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind—even the dharma of attaining Buddhahood. This empty characteristic signifies its nature as the Mind of Emptiness.

[*The term "xiàng" (相; pronounced in the 4th tone) is a significant word in Chinese Buddhism that warrants clarification. In Sanskrit, both "lakṣaṇa" and "nimitta" were translated as "xiàng" by several prominent translators in ancient China. Lakṣaṇa refers to characteristics, attributes, marks or features, though it is often rendered as "form" in Chinese-to-English translations by modern translators. On the other hand, "nimitta" signifies signs, marks, functions or tokens. Another Sanskrit term, "saṃjñā" (as in the mental factor of perception), which indicates perception, cognition, awareness or concepts.

In the *Diamond Sutra*, Kumārajīva translated all three Sanskrit terms as the same character, "xiàng" (相). In contrast, translators like Xuanzang and Yijing distinguished between "nimitta" and "saṃjñā," translating them as "xiǎng" (想, indicating a form that arises from the mind; pronounced in the 3rd tone).

A comparative analysis of these three Sanskrit terms within the *Diamond Sutra* reveals that "lakṣaṇa" refers to physical form or object, whereas "nimitta" pertains to mental images, often paired with "saṃjñā" (as in nimitta-saṃjñā). "saṃjñā" itself denotes concepts or perceptions arising from mental formations, as in one of the well-known expressions from the *Diamond Sutra*, "a self (ātma-saṃjñā), a person (pudgala-saṃjñā), a living being (sattva-saṃjñā) and a lifespan (jīva-saṃjñā)."

Kumārajīva's influential translation of the *Diamond Sutra*, which standardized "xiàng" for these terms, has had a lasting effect from his era to the present. Although this translation became widely accepted—and many early practitioners may not have been familiar with the original Sanskrit terms—the Chinese language, with its flexibility in compounding characters for clarity, allows for nuanced meaning to be conveyed succinctly.

I have generally translated "xiàng" as "form" in most cases but made exceptions when "characteristics" or "perceptions" better reflect the context.]

Conversely, the non-empty aspect of the Tathāgatagarbha is its capacity for becoming. To understand this, we must explore the origin of myriad dharmas within the three realms of existence. The Buddha teaches that "the three realms of existence are mind-only—cittamātra," referring to the Tathāgatagarbha, from which all dharmas arise. The Tathāgatagarbha contains the seeds of all dharmas, including its intrinsic great seeds, and the karmic seeds. These seeds bear fruits, with all mundane dharmas arising from them—illustrating its wondrous becoming. The presence of these seeds and their fruits confirms the non-empty nature of the Tathāgatagarbha. By examining both its empty and non-empty aspects, we gain a more complete understanding of its essential nature.

The *Heart Sutra* states, "All dharmas are of empty nature." What does this mean? It means that myriad dharmas—including the Tathāgatagarbha itself, the five skandhas, the eighteen realms of phenomena and all dharmas within the three realms of existence—are characteristically empty. The form of the Tathāgatagarbha is empty, and the forms of the five skandhas, the eighteen realms and

all dharmas produced by the Tathāgatagarbha are also empty in nature.

The concept of "empty nature" has two intricate meanings. First, the Tathāgatagarbha itself is empty of mundane characteristics. Second, although it produces mundane forms within the three realms, these forms are also empty in essence despite their appearances.

Why are mundane forms empty? Because they are transformations of the Tathāgatagarbha and are therefore unreal. Their apparent characteristics and functionalities are imparted by the Tathāgatagarbha. We perceive these forms as real, but they are as illusory as sunbeams deceiving our eyes. Their arising, ceasing and transforming qualities are merely manifestations of the Tathāgatagarbha's wondrous functionings and lack an intrinsic self. This is why they are termed "all dharmas are of empty nature." Despite their functionalities, they remain expressions of the Tathāgatagarbha's wondrous nature, similar to how a puppet has no inherent function of its own. Thus, "all dharmas are of empty nature" encompasses both the Tathāgatagarbha's characteristics and the forms it creates.

2.

The emptiness described in the *Heart Sutra* pertains to the Mind of Emptiness, which is the Tathāgatagarbha. The sutra highlights the non-arising and non-ceasing nature of this true mind, not the emptiness of nothingness implied by the phrase "all dharmas are empty." The teaching that "everything is empty" is central to Hinayana sutras, whereas Mahayana sutras focus on the Tathāgatagarbha. The Tathāgatagarbha's form is characteristically empty because it lacks the six sense faculties, six sensory realms and six consciousnesses. It is formless and shapeless; yet, despite these attributes, it can manifest all forms. It generates form-dharma, integrating it into itself, and establishing a relationship that is neither one nor different. From this perspective, "form does not differ from emptiness, and emptiness does not differ from form."

This Mind of Emptiness represents the true essence that transcends form, while form, lacking inherent substance, is created by this true essence. It embodies the true form and the true formless form, and because of its essence, it perpetually generates all dharmas. To perceive and understand this, one must use wisdom-eyes and dharma-eyes. Our physical eyes, which can only see form, cannot perceive the formless Tathāgatagarbha. The inability of our physical eyes to detect it does not imply its non-existence. Rejecting it marks one as an incorrigible non-believer—an icchantika.

Because of this true essence, some sentient beings forsake their physical bodies and persist in practicing Buddhadharma without resentment or regret. Without this true essence, Buddhadharma would be as meaningless as the nothingness espoused by heretics. If only nothingness existed, practice would be futile. The Buddha came into our world to reveal this primordial essence, enabling us to awaken to it. If the Tathāgatagarbha were not real, the Buddha's mission would be meaningless; if it were not real, sentient beings would not experience their five skandhas in the cycle of samsara; if it were not real, karmic seeds would have no place to be stored or processed, causes and conditions would not be fulfilled, and there would be no karmic fruits. The Buddha declared that the Tathāgatagarbha is the mind of true reality; true reality signifies true form. The Tathāgatagarbha is akin to a Cintāmaṇi, the wish-fulfilling jewel that holds the seeds of myriad dharmas and can manifest all dharmas according to karmic conditions. It is the most precious "entity" in both mundane and supramundane worlds, inspiring numerous Buddhist patriarchs to come into this world.

3.

By studying and practicing the teachings of Prajñā, we can aspire to be like the Bodhisattva Aveśvara, who deeply and subtly practices the profound Prajñāpāramitā. Engaging in subtle and profound contemplation in samādhi, we come to understand, upon verifying our true minds, that our five skandhas are illusory, impermanent, unreal, empty, and devoid of self—all manifestations of the Tathāgatagarbha. Equipped with this great wisdom—Prajñā—

we will gradually move away from the suffering sea of birth and death. With this great wisdom, we will recognize that birth and death are also empty, dependent on the Tathāgatagarbha for their existence, and as illusory as flowers in empty space.

Although the five skandhas-body it manifests embodies the characteristic of suffering, it is ultimately illusory and unreal, while the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha, free from suffering, transcends birth and death. By contemplating this truth—that suffering is not real—we can transcend the sea of suffering. Birth and death are like illusory flowers. Bodhisattvas who realize this truth are freed from the fear of birth and death, allowing them to navigate the cycle of birth and death with ease. This understanding empowers them to liberate countless sentient beings from the suffering sea of birth and death.

4.

The primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha is pure and undefiled, free from the three poisons and ignorance. It does not interact with or differentiate the phenomena of the six sensory realms, nor does it harbor thoughts or give rise to them. As emphasized in the *Heart Sutra*'s refrain of "no…no…no…," its emptiness signifies a lack of inherent characteristics, yet within it lie the seeds of myriad dharmas, which manifest according to these seeds. While its primordial essence embodies "becoming," its form remains empty. This "becoming-ness" points to its true existence, whereas its empty form reflects the nature of emptiness—the Mind of Emptiness itself. Illusory dharmas appear to exhibit "becoming" through their forms, but their true nature is empty, revealing that this "becoming" is ultimately illusory.

The empty nature of the Tathāgatagarbha is distinctly different from that of mundane dharmas. Mundane dharmas, lacking a self-nature, are inherently unattainable and thus impeded. The Tathāgatagarbha, on the other hand, is formless, with a primordial essence that is unbound by perceivable form, yet it exists fully in its formlessness. This paradox makes it difficult to grasp, posing challenges for beginners in the study and practice of

Buddhadharma. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations often arise when one cannot discern its mechanisms clearly.

To regard the Tathāgatagarbha and its primordial essence as nonexistent is to adopt the view of heretics. Such a view negates the intrinsic true nature of the mind of reality, contradicting the teachings of the *Heart Sutra*. Although the sutra explains that the true mind of Tathāgatagarbha has no sense faculties, no six sensory realms, no Mahayana and Hinayana teachings, and no all dharmas—its primordial essence still exists, storing seeds and possessing true characteristics and functionings.

Some people perceive the Tathāgatagarbha as entirely empty, devoid of any existence, but some sutras reveal that the true mind contains and manifests myriad dharmas. It is the true formless mind with the inherent power of "becoming" that brings forth and transforms all dharmas. Mistaking the true mind as a mere concept, some wrongly believe awakening equates to perceiving nothingness. This misconception obscures the true nature of awakening and what one truly awakens to. Unlike the five skandhas and eighteen realms of phenomena, the true mind exists in a formless state; those who cannot grasp this often see it as nonexistence and fail to realize its true nature.

There are also those who argue that all dharmas, including the Tathāgatagarbha, are dependently originated and, because of this, lack an intrinsic self. They mistakenly apply this reasoning to claim that even the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha is empty. However, they fail to recognize that the Tathāgatagarbha does not arise from dependent origination—it is the only Dharma that exists independently of causes and conditions. Few realize that while myriad dharmas arise through dependent origination, it is the Tathāgatagarbha that underlies and brings forth the causes and conditions for their existence. Misunderstandings abound regarding the origin of the six consciousness-minds, with some believing that the six sense faculties naturally generate consciousness through contact with sensory realms. Such views dismiss the essential role of the Tathāgatagarbha, leaving one blind to the true reality of the Dharma Realm.

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha refuted the heretical claim that all dharmas are born naturally, concluding that all dharmas arise from the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha and are created by it. When the six sense faculties come into contact with the six sensory realms, it is the Tathāgatagarbha that brings forth the six consciousnesses, indicating that it is the source of these consciousnesses. All myriad things have a source, and this source is the true mind—the Tathāgatagarbha. All dharmas are surrounded by the true mind for their arising, dwelling, transmuting and ceasing. Depart from the true mind, no dharma can exist. The doctrines of emptiness preached by heretics are either one-sided or incorrect; this is due to their lack of the right view, which distorts their practice, making it neither beneficial nor capable of liberating or awakening them, but instead continuing to draw them into the cycle of samsara. This highlights that having the right view is a prerequisite for effective practice.

5. Emptiness and Becoming in the Mahayana Teaching

[This section has been discussed in Chapter 2, Section 5.4]

Mahayana scriptures discuss the concept of becoming, embodied by the Tathāgatagarbha, which serves as the foundation for practicing and realizing Buddhadharma. Without the Tathāgatagarbha, no dharma would arise. Straying from this core principle of becoming while discussing Buddhadharma is regarded as heretical, marking a clear distinction between heretics and Mahayana practitioners.

Previously, we examined the twelve links of dependent origination practiced by Pratyekabuddhas, which also rely on the core principle of becoming. Without this, the doctrine of the twelve links cannot be established. Departing from the essence of Thusness to discuss Emptiness or Becoming amounts to mental proliferation. Pratyekabuddhas, who trace the origin of birth and death, eventually reach Thusness and understand that consciousness arises from name-and-form and must return to it, as there is no forward path. They realize that no dharma can exist or be created without

the Tathāgatagarbha and thus conclude that "Consciousness causes name-and-form; name-and-form causes consciousness."

This means that the birth and death of the five skandhas-body result from the Tathāgatagarbha. The Tathāgatagarbha produces the five skandhas and name-and-form, and in turn, they depend on the Tathāgatagarbha for their existence. The body, conceived from formlessness, originates from the formless Tathāgatagarbha, not from nothingness or nowhere. This indicates that the source of life is the Tathāgatagarbha. "Ignorance causes formations" implies that without ignorance, mental formations would not arise. However, without the Tathāgatagarbha, there would be no ignorance, no mental formations and no sentient beings.

Similarly, the four noble truths fundamentally rely on Becoming as practiced by Śrāvakas; without this foundation, it would devolve into mere mental proliferation. Suffering arises from causes, leading to the path of practice and ultimately the cessation of suffering—all dependent on the Tathāgatagarbha. Arhats, having attained liberation, adhere to the Buddha's teachings on the reliance of birth and death, believing that something inextinguishable remains after passing away. They understand that entering Nirvāṇa is not equivalent to annihilation but is rather a fruition and the severing of the self in the nirvanic state of full extinction. This belief empowers them to fully renounce their existence upon attaining Arhatship.

Understanding Thusness is crucial for contemporary practitioners, yet many lack clarity and confuse its empty and non-empty aspects. They may misinterpret the empty nature and emptiness. Without understanding these distinctions, authentically realizing Thusness is impossible. Those who fail to realize it do not know what Thusness is or how it is formless, leading to incorrect views that the formlessness of Thusness is nothingness.

Expounding the principle of Thusness with clarity requires addressing its non-empty aspect, its manifestation of all dharmas, and its storage of karmic seeds—hallmarks of great wisdom. Denying the existence of Thusness is akin to dismissing the Tathāgatagarbha's reality as illusory and false, which leads to the Annihilationist Doctrine. False dharmas cannot manifest true

functionings or virtues. In contrast, Thusness genuinely contains infinite seeds and possesses boundless virtues, which is why we affirm that Thusness is true, not false.

Fully comprehending the virtues of the seeds signifies attaining the Bodhisattva Path Wisdom. A Bodhisattva's awakening brings a gradual understanding of the functioning of seeds within the Tathāgatagarbha, thereby enhancing their wisdom. Upon fully mastering this understanding, they achieve the final stage of Omniscient wisdom, a state attained only by Buddhas.

All dharmas and all forms brought forth by the Tathāgatagarbha are nothing but phenomena of illusory bubbles and shadow. However, Thusness is not; it is the true Becoming—only Real Dharma can be verified and attained. Understanding this principle is crucial for verifying Thusness and ultimately attaining awakening.

In contrast, pursuing phenomena that lead only to nothingness or voidness without understanding their relationship to Thusness is futile. It's likened to peeling layers off a banana tree, only to find nothing substantial at the core—an empty pursuit that leads to nothing. Pursuing and verifying Thusness on the other hand, can lead to the attainment of infinite wisdom and eventually to Buddhahood.

The Buddha cautions Bodhisattvas to pursue the type of emptiness attained by the Arhats, urging them not to extinguish all dharmas but to make good use of it. The Bodhisattva Path is a path of self-benefiting and altruism for the well-being of all sentient beings. Their practice is deeply rooted in Thusness; they first pursue verifying and attaining, then they awaken and attain the Thusness. Later, they rely and rest on Thusness to practice and realize themselves for the path of Buddhahood. In summary, both Buddhadharma and mundane dharmas rely on Thusness to exist; the teaching of Thusness is incredibly profound and arduous to fathom.

6. Difference between the empty nature and emptiness

The empty nature refers to both the intrinsic nature of myriad dharmas and their attributes, which are fundamentally empty, as myriad dharmas cannot exist independently and are incapable of self-governance. Being creations and manifestations of the Tathāgatagarbha makes them illusory and unreal, further affirming their empty nature. It is akin to a holographic man created by a pattern of lights; it would be impossible to claim that such a figure has a true nature, and its bodily activities and speech are merely illusory functions.

Myriad dharmas are like holograms, empty of intrinsic nature. This signifies that everything created and manifested is unreal and lacks an inherent essence. Consider a robot, for instance, mechanically constructed and operating with artificial intelligence; its activities are illusory because they are not initiated by the robot itself but are controlled by a program. This illustrates the empty nature of all dharmas. In contrast, all functionings and characteristics of the Tathāgatagarbha are real, and it is through this realness that myriad dharmas take form.

Dependent origination refers to phenomena arising from various conditions, lacking an intrinsic self and the ability to determine their own existence. The teaching of dependent origination pertains to illusory dharmas and does not address the true nature of the Tathāgatagarbha and its Thusness, which represents a fundamental distinction from the Dharma of True Reality. However, the existence of illusory dharmas also relies on the Tathāgatagarbha. Dependent origination is defined by empty nature, whereas the essence of the Tathāgatagarbha is not empty; it possesses a true essence with both conditioned and unconditioned natures and does not depend on any dharma for its existence. Hence, it is referred to as the Mind of Emptiness.

7.

The “true emptiness that transcends form” [known as the Contemplation of True Emptiness in the Huayan teaching] refers to

the Mind of Emptiness, the Tathāgatagarbha. It possesses none of the characteristics (nimitta-saṃjñā) of mundane phenomena, and it is devoid of the five skandhas, the eighteen realms of phenomena, the four noble truths, the twelve links of dependent origination, and the six paramitas; it lacks both wisdom and attainability. What possesses characteristics is absent in ālaya-vijñāna, making it the Mind of Emptiness with a formless form. However, its primordial essence exists; it is non-arising, non-ceasing, and stores the seeds of myriad dharmas. It is also capable of bringing forth myriad dharmas, thus having real functionings and a non-empty aspect. By practicing like the Bodhisattva "Aveśvara," engaging in the profound Prajñāpāramitā, and practicing deeply subtle "guānxíng," we can attain our true mind.

Attaining the Tathāgatagarbha involves simultaneously realizing the empty nature of the five skandhas—their illusory, no-self, impermanent, and unreal aspects—and understanding that they are illusory manifestations of the Tathāgatagarbha, with their essence being the essence of the Tathāgatagarbha itself. This realization allows our great wisdom, Prajñā, to be illuminated instantaneously, enabling us to gradually depart from the suffering sea of birth and death. While our true mind is devoid of birth, death and suffering, our five skandhas-bodies, relying on it, can slowly transcend the suffering of birth and death. Furthermore, since birth and death are like flowers in empty space, Bodhisattvas who have attained this truth are unafraid of them and can navigate the cycle of birth and death with ease, liberating countless sentient beings from the suffering sea of birth and death.

8.

"Aveśvara" Bodhisattva practices the profound Prajñāpāramitā and directly perceives the empty nature of the five skandhas, thereby alleviating all suffering. By practicing this profound wisdom, Bodhisattvas realize their Tathāgatagarbhas and come to understand that the five skandhas are illusory manifestations of the Tathāgatagarbha, akin to a puppet performing a play where the

underlying substance is absent, impeded and unable to self-determine. Despite their apparent existence, their nature is empty.

It is comparable to a person with low blood pressure experiencing dizziness and blurred vision, perceiving the world as fuzzy dots. While these dots are visible, they are illusory and unreal. Understanding the cause removes the fear of these illusions. Similarly, the five skandhas can be seen as these fuzzy dots. However, simply recognizing their illusory nature is insufficient. One must practice the profound and subtle Prajñāpāramitā by deeply investigating and contemplating the true nature of the five skandhas; this practice is essential for fully comprehending their empty nature.

To cultivate the Prajñā of contemplation, a Bodhisattva must practice the six paramitas and reach the stage of the sixth paramita —Prajñāpāramitā. This stage requires the wisdom of contemplation for successful realization. Once the Bodhisattva attains this primordial and unimpeded mind, they recognize it as an unattainable mind that does not grasp at mundane dharmas, as it lacks nothing. Regardless of the terms used to describe it, this mind remains unimpeded and unconcerned with worldly attachments.

During contemplation, if the Bodhisattva perceives how the Tathāgatagarbha operates through the five skandhas, they directly comprehend how the five skandhas are brought forth from the Tathāgatagarbha and that their existence originates from it. At this moment, they recognize the illusory nature of the five skandhas—non-self, impermanence and empty—a realization that was once obscured by ignorance. They now attain their true mind and understand that all dharmas are manifestations of the Tathāgatagarbha, and that all phenomena arise from it. There are no real five skandhas or real suffering, as suffering itself is a manifestation of the Tathāgatagarbha. Since the Tathāgatagarbha is free from suffering, when it manifests, all suffering is thoroughly extinguished.

This realization allows “Aveśvara” Bodhisattva, who practices profound Prajñāpāramitā, to see clearly that the five skandhas are empty and, as a result, to relieve all suffering. We should follow the

example of “Aveśvara” Bodhisattva to overcome the afflictions of our five skandhas.

9.

“The very substance is empty.” Here, “substance” refers to people, affairs, things, and principles. “Empty” signifies that, in each present moment of existence, the phenomena of substance are fundamentally empty and unreal. What appears to be real and substantial is, in fact, an illusory form manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha. Because we fail to see through these illusions and mistakenly perceive them as real, we cannot grasp the true underlying substance of these phenomena or understand the nature and causes of their appearance. This is akin to children who focus solely on the puppet and its performance on stage, unaware that the puppetry is inherently illusory.

In the same way, all dharmas in the mundane world—whether large or small, form or formless—are governed by the fundamental essence of the true mind. Only this mind is real; everything else is illusory. Therefore, all phenomena in the mundane world are empty in their substance, and this empty nature is the Mind of Emptiness —the Tathāgatagarbha. Once we directly realize and experience this truth, we attain Bodhisattvahood and understand that the true substance of all dharmas is the Tathāgatagarbha, which sustains them. At this stage, we realize the three wheels of emptiness, where no individual dharma truly exists.

10.

The “three wheels of emptiness” denote that the forms of all dharmas are empty at every present moment. The depth of this teaching is profound. The “three wheels” refer to entity A, entity B and the connections between them. The “emptied form” indicates that A, B and their connections are all empty because they are manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha and lack any real self-nature.

Take dāna, the virtue of generosity, as an example: the giver is empty, the receiver is empty, and what is given is empty as well.

Why are they all empty? In the *Āgama Sutra*, the Buddha teaches that the five skandhas are not the self, and that the person and self within the five skandhas are empty, illusory, and devoid of self-nature. Similarly, in the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha explains that the four perceptions—self, person, living being, and lifespan—are empty. These forms manifest from the Tathāgatagarbha according to conditions and are characterized by arising, ceasing, transmuting, and an unreal nature. Likewise, all dharmas are manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha based on conditions, sharing this nature of arising, ceasing, transmuting and being unreal.

In this context, entities A and B are manifestations of Tathāgatagarbha, exhibiting the empty nature of arising, ceasing and transmuting. The thing that is given is also a manifestation of Tathāgatagarbha, based on conditions, and shares the same empty nature as A and B. For example, if someone gives me one thousand dollars, and I put it in my pocket, then say to the giver, "You didn't give me anything, I didn't receive anything, I didn't even see any money, and no giving took place," the person's reaction would depend on their understanding of the three wheels of emptiness. If they have not attained this state of the three wheels of emptiness and still cling to forms, self, person and material things, they might react with anger due to their attachment.

For a Bodhisattva who has attained the three wheels of emptiness, there is no perception of the five skandhas as a self, nor do they see others' five skandhas or the things and affairs connected to these people. They perceive only the empty nature of all phenomena. Such a Bodhisattva understands that people, affairs, things and ideas are pure characteristics manifested by Tathāgatagarbha. To them, these phenomena are illusory manifestations of Tathāgatagarbha, akin to sunbeams, dreams or reflections in a mirror. The seven consciousness-minds that perceive these phenomena, and the phenomena themselves, are the essence of Tathāgatagarbha—emptiness—revealing that there is neither a perceiver nor that which is perceived.

To attain the state of the three wheels of emptiness, we must diligently practice the six paramitas and engage in "cānchán" to realize our mind and see our true nature. This practice leads

through three stages of realization: illusion-like contemplation, where we recognize phenomena as illusory; sunbeam contemplation, where we understand phenomena as fleeting and insubstantial; and dream-like contemplation, where we perceive phenomena as ephemeral and unreal. This progression allows us to attain consciousness-only (vijñānamātra) wisdom, entering the first ground of the Bodhisattva Path and continuing our practice through the ten grounds. At this level, a Bodhisattva no longer perceives people, dharmas, things and affairs; rather, they see only the empty nature of all phenomena and engage in mental proliferation and differentiation as a way of abiding in the mundane dharmas.

To reach this stage, we must diligently practice to sever the view of self, verify our true mind, realize our true nature, and cut off the five desires of wealth, lust, fame, food and sleep [refers to the five hindrances in the Theravada tradition]. By doing so, we can achieve the first Dhyāna, gradually cutting off afflictions, maintaining concentration and contemplating all dharmas to attain true wisdom. It is also essential to fully comprehend the teachings of both vehicles, which will enable us to enter the first ground of the Bodhisattva Path and ultimately attain the three wheels of emptiness.

11.

There are roughly three types of emptiness.

The first type is Tathāgatagarbha's emptiness. This emptiness is formless and lacks any specific shape, feature, size or dimension. Although it does not possess physical attributes, its essence is real, described as the Mind of Emptiness. This form of existence is difficult for ordinary people to grasp because it is imperceptible in the conventional sense within the three realms of existence—we cannot see, hear, smell, taste or touch it, nor is it even conceivable. Consequently, many mistakenly believe that Tathāgatagarbha is merely a name without real substance or is not a self. This misconception is common and challenging to correct. If Tathāgatagarbha were considered both empty in form and essence-less, it would be akin to nihilistic emptiness, similar to empty space.

Without Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence, there would be no foundation for the seeds to be established. Without these seeds, no dharmas could be brought forth, as creation requires an essence. This essence is essential for the creation of the five skandhas, the store of karmic seeds, and the fulfillment of the law of causes and conditions. If dharmas could be created without an essence, then empty space should be able to bring forth all dharmas, store sentient beings' karmic seeds, fulfill karmic fruit and manifest myriad Buddha-realms in the ten directions. However, empty space does not possess these functionings; it is created by Tathāgatagarbha and is itself impeded. Thus, the fact that dharmas can be created indicates that seeds exist and that there is an essence to store them, providing evidence that Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence is genuinely true and not false.

The second type of emptiness refers to the fact that all dharmas are empty of inherent form—the empty nature of all dharmas. Although all dharmas appear to have form and their phenomena seem to exist, they are illusory and not fundamentally real. Their existence arises from illusory creation, emerging from nothingness into something, from arising to ceasing, and from dependent origination; they are as unreal as a banana tree.

The third type is nihilistic emptiness, characterized by the absence of anything—essentially the opposite of becoming. It represents the nature of arising and ceasing dharmas. Nihilistic emptiness can be likened to empty space, which has no form (rūpa). For instance, when digging a well from a piece of land, the resulting empty space is an illusion created by removing soil. This "emptiness" comes from nowhere and lacks substance. If we put the soil back into the well, the empty space disappears without any actual transition. Similarly, a room is empty when the furniture is removed; when furniture is added, the room is no longer empty. This type of emptiness is everywhere and boundless; since it is boundless, it can accommodate numerous Buddha-realms, allowing all sentient beings to attain Buddhahood and have their own realms without concerns about space.

These three types of emptiness can be difficult for individuals with limited merits and shallow root of virtues to comprehend.

Influenced by various wrong views, they may form misconceptions that hinder their understanding. As a result, overcoming these misunderstandings can be a significant obstacle to their practice.

12.

Only those who have realized their true minds and attained awakening can truly experience and perceive emptiness. Practitioners at the non-enlightened stage often speculate and analyze what emptiness might be. Their attachment to their views remains uncut, causing them to cling to the knowledge of emptiness gained through analysis as if it were correct. This attachment to views—dṛṣṭiparāmarśa—is an impediment that prevents one from breaking free from the egoistic self-view—satkāya-dṛṣṭi.

The emptiness that ordinary people often discuss typically refers to the cessation of thoughts and the quieting of the mind achieved through practices like samādhi. They mistakenly equate this with the emptiness of Tathāgatagarbha. Since they have not genuinely attained this deeper emptiness, they cannot experience the intrinsic emptiness of Tathāgatagarbha and struggle to comprehend it when they encounter the teaching. Such an understanding of emptiness remains superficial; it is akin to repeatedly telling oneself to “drop it” while practicing for a lifetime without ever truly letting go. Consequently, at the moment of death, they remain ensnared by their karma and re-enter the cycle of samsara.

The right practice should adhere to the directions laid out by the Buddha. First, one must engage with the four noble truths and the four foundations of mindfulness to realize the emptiness taught in Hinayana, effectively cutting off the egoistic self-view. Only after achieving this understanding can one truly “drop it.” Subsequently, practitioners should turn to the Mahayana teachings to attain intrinsic emptiness.

These phenomena represent only one stage in practice. When one’s virtuous merit is sufficient, they can quickly transcend this stage, as great wisdom requires substantial virtuous merit to support and sustain it. Insufficient virtuous merit impedes practice

and leads to various wrong views. For example, a Zen master, before dying, sought a Dharma heir and tested his disciples' wisdom. When a disciple presented their view, the Zen master remarked that the disciple's virtuous merit was insufficient to carry on the tradition. This illustrates that weak virtuous merit leads to weak wisdom, rendering the disciple unfit to continue the Dharma lineage.

Virtuous merit encompasses both mundane and supramundane aspects, with the latter being critical for attaining the Emptiness of Prajñā. One must cultivate sufficient virtuous merit by practicing the threefold training—Śīla, Samādhi and Prajñā—and diligently practicing the six paramitas.

13.

All dharmas in the mundane world are connected to Buddhadharma, as they are created by the Tathāgatagarbha and are integral to it. By understanding and realizing this principle, great wisdom is brought forth, enabling one to comprehend and attain all dharmas.

Are there forms within the essence of Tathāgatagarbha that can be divided? Since it has no form, it cannot be divided at all. We should gradually adapt to the formless existence of Tathāgatagarbha and align ourselves with it. This will allow us to attain it more quickly and resonate with Buddhadharma. Given that all dharmas are interconnected with Buddhadharma, discussing any phenomenon as if it exists independently is considered a heretical view—tīrthika-dṛṣṭi and should be avoided.

Our habitual grasping at forms, since beginningless time, prevents us from fathoming the formless essence of Tathāgatagarbha, thus hindering our attainment of it. Since Tathāgatagarbha is without shape, our five skandhas cannot come into contact with it. It transcends the phenomena of coming and going, making it impossible to pinpoint its location. Beyond temporal forms, we cannot use space, time, distance, and mundane notions of coming and going to conceptualize or confine it. Yet, when describing its functionings in relation to the five skandhas, we

have no choice but to use language, even though these descriptions cannot fully capture its true essence or conditions.

The relationship between Tathāgatagarbha, the five skandhas, the seven consciousnesses, and the myriad dharmas in the mundane world is one of being collectively yet non-collectively, together yet not together, neither coming nor going, and neither co-joined nor separated. We cannot use the attributes of material forms to contemplate it, nor can we grasp it through our false minds—the seven consciousnesses. To realize it, we must move beyond our habitual conceptual frameworks and learn to contemplate it in a new way. This approach will help us resonate with and connect to it, making it easier to find and ultimately realize it.

14.

In the *Perfect Enlightenment Sutra*《圓覺經》, the Buddha states that all dharmas—whether wholesome or unwholesome, including realms of hell and heavens, as well as all phenomena in the mundane world—are inherently pure. Even disparaging dharmas, sanghas and stupas are considered pure, while studying the Buddha Way and practicing the six paramitas are viewed as even purer. Since all dharmas are the wondrous functioning of Tathāgatagarbha, they embody the "empty nature at every present moment." Even when they are not perceived as empty, they remain pure.

For instance, consider a machine designed to kill sentient beings. The machine itself is not stained by the intention to kill because it lacks mental volition and is not self-determined. Its actions are determined by the programming set by its creator. Similarly, when one realizes the emptiness of all dharmas, even hellish karma is understood as empty, and ultimately, they will not experience suffering in hell.

Take the example of a magician with transcendental powers who creates illusory beings. These beings may appear to engage in wholesome or unwholesome actions, but since their existence is illusory, they do not produce actual karmic results. All karmas are illusory constructions without inherent substance. For example, if

the magician creates two illusory beings, and one kills the other, no real killing or harm occurs. Both the act of killing and the beings involved are illusions created by the magician. As a result, the magician, the creator of these illusions, does not experience any karmic consequence from these actions. This illustrates the illusory nature of all dharmas.

To perceive these phenomena as real is to hold upside-down views. Therefore, we need not contemplate that a dream is just a dream upon awakening, as it remains a dream even while we are awake. It is like seeing a dream within a dream. The one who contemplates and the act of contemplation itself are both part of the dream. Thus, all dharmas are dreams.

Chapter 11:
The Tathāgatagarbha and Seeing One's Nature

1.

"Nature-perceiving" generally refers to "seeing one's nature," (kenso) as discussed by the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng. This means perceiving one's original mind or self-nature, not simply that the "eyes see the Buddha-nature." The latter refers to a different degree of seeing one's nature. "Perceiving" denotes the functioning of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, awareness and cognition—phenomena that arise and cease. In most cases, they disappear when one is unable to see, hear, smell, taste, touch or cognize and reappear when conditions are ripe. These phenomena go through cycles of arising and ceasing, and they are ungraspable and illusory.

Seeing one's nature is not about perceiving the arising, ceasing and transmuting of dharmas; rather, it is about recognizing that within their functioning exists an original mind that neither arises nor ceases, which one must verify and attain. This self-nature always exists, whether perceived or not. Through the coordinated functioning of the eight consciousnesses, one sees their nature, enabling them to see, hear, contact and cognize. Through this perceiving, they clearly understand the functioning of Tathāgatagarbha, distinguish true from false, and avoid mistaking the false for the true. Having perceived their original mind and attained realization of their Tathāgatagarbha, they now comprehend how the true mind operates, how it coordinates with the seven consciousness-minds, and how the six sensory realms are brought forth. They also understand that the five skandhas were created by the true mind and recognize that the five skandhas are not a true self. At this stage, they cut off the egoistic view of self and attain the first fruition.

2. The great perceiving in the Tathāgatagarbha

The nature of the great perceiving seed in the Tathāgatagarbha is described in the *Shurangama Sutra*, Chapter 3. The Buddha explains that "perceiving knows no; awareness-perceiving arises as a result of form and empty space." This indicates that once the great perceiving seed arises, awareness emerges, but this awareness lacks knowing. While it can operate through the six sense faculties, it does not recognize the six sensory realms—this is the nature-perceiving of Tathāgatagarbha. In contrast, the perceiving nature of the seven consciousnesses does recognize the six sensory realms.

Moreover, nature-perceiving relies on the interplay of darkness and light, as well as empty space for its existence. Without these elements, it cannot exist, indicating that it is formed by the great perceiving seed and does not exist independently, unlike the Tathāgatagarbha.

The relationship between nature-perceiving and the Tathāgatagarbha is neither identical nor entirely separate; nature-perceiving cannot function without dark-and-light and empty space. However, these elements do not constitute its essence; without them, it ceases to exist. When these elements disappear, nature-perceiving also ceases, leaving only the Tathāgatagarbha in the nirvanic state of full extinction, where the seven great seeds do not manifest. In this state, nature-perceiving is absent, further indicating that it is subject to arising and ceasing as a creation of the great perceiving seed. It always exists, even in the intermediate state—antarābhava—except in the nirvanic state.

Though the nature-perceiving of the Tathāgatagarbha is Buddha-nature, Buddha-nature does not exist without Tathāgatagarbha. When Tathāgatagarbha is in functioning, Buddha-nature manifests. Their relationship is neither identical nor entirely different. In terms of Tathāgatagarbha's essence, Buddha-nature is non-arising and non-ceasing, reflecting the intrinsic nature of Tathāgatagarbha. All dharmas arise from the intrinsic nature of Tathāgatagarbha, and they are brought into being by the seven great seeds of Tathāgatagarbha, with its primordial essence being the only one that is unborn. This means that great perceiving is a seed that

produces the nature-perceiving of Tathāgatagarbha. In the nirvanic state, where great perceiving is not functioning and dark-and-light and empty space are absent, Buddha-nature cannot manifest.

3.

The Tathāgatagarbha's intrinsic nature is the Buddha-nature, and just as the Tathāgatagarbha pervades all places, so too does Buddha-nature. The Tathāgatagarbha pervades the six sense faculties, six sensory realms, and six consciousnesses, and Buddha-nature follows suit. Thus, Buddha-nature can manifest through these faculties, realms, and consciousnesses. For instance, we perceive Buddha-nature in the form sensory realm through the eye faculty, hear it in the sound sensory realm through the ear faculty, smell it in the smell sensory realm through the nose faculty, taste it in the taste sensory realm through the tongue faculty, touch it in the contact sensory realm through the body faculty, and become aware of it in the object of mind through the mind faculty.

4.

The Tathāgatagarbha's great perceiving seed can perceive all dharmas and manifest through them; however, the Tathāgatagarbha itself cannot differentiate the specific content of the six sensory realms' phenomena. The great perceiving seed forms the nature-perceiving of the Tathāgatagarbha, reflecting on all dharmas' functioning. This nature-perceiving is called Buddha-nature. Without the great perceiving of the Tathāgatagarbha, there would be no perceiving by the seven consciousnesses.

Right before his enlightenment, the Buddha, in his Vajra-like Samādhi—Vajropamā-samādhi, looked up at the starry night sky and perceived his complete and perfect Buddha-nature. In that kṣaṇa, the last traces of ignorance were completely eradicated, the Great Mirror Wisdom manifested, and his four wisdom were perfected and illuminating—he attained Buddhahood. There are varying degrees of perceiving Buddha-nature, each corresponding to different levels of wisdom, signifying the diverse degree of seeing

one's Buddha-nature. Only a Buddha can fully and perfectly see not only their own Buddha-nature but also the Buddha-nature of all sentient beings.

The stages of perceiving one's nature are categorized into the Ten Stages of Abiding—Daśa-vihāra-bhūmi, the Ten Stages of Practice—Daśa-caryā-bhūmi, the Ten Stages of Dedication—Daśa-pariṇāmanā-bhūmi, the Ten Grounds—Daśa-bhūmi, [Equal] Enlightenment—Saṃbodhi, and Wondrous Enlightenment—Anuttarā-samyak-saṃbodhi. When a Bodhisattva reaches the nature-perceiving of Wondrous Enlightenment, the Great Mirror Wisdom manifests, and they enter the Buddha-realm, attaining the complete and perfect fruit of Buddhahood. This signifies that only through Wondrous Enlightenment can one achieve Buddhahood in the present life. Throughout the entire Tripiṭaka, the Buddha did not mention attaining Buddhahood in one's present life outside of this stage, indicating that such attainment is possible only for Bodhisattvas who have reached Wondrous Enlightenment, and not for those who remain in earlier stages of practice.

5. The Distinction between Buddha-nature and Tathāgatagarbha

There are two types of Buddha-nature: one enables sentient beings to attain Buddhahood, and the other refers to the nature-perceiving by which Tathāgatagarbha perceives all dharmas. Some believe Buddha-nature only manifests when one's mind-ground is pure, but regardless of a sentient being's mind-ground, Buddha-nature is always radiating, shaking the earth, illuminating the universe. Even in the hell realms, where beings' mind-grounds are defiled, their Buddha-nature continues to permeate. It is the deluded seven consciousnesses that fail to recognize it.

The Tathāgatagarbha is the essence of attaining Buddhahood. Sentient beings are capable of attaining Buddhahood because of its non-arising, non-ceasing primordial essence. However, it is crucial to clarify that Buddha-nature is merely one of the many functionings of this primordial essence; it is not the primordial

essence itself. Many mistakenly believe that Buddha-nature is the primordial essence, thinking that realizing one's true mind equates to attaining the Tathāgatagarbha's primordial functionings.

The functioning of Buddha-nature is distinct, while realizing one's mind pertains to the verification of the functionings and characteristics of the Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence. These two should not be confused, as misunderstanding them can obstruct perceiving one's Buddha-nature and hinder the attainment of the second gate in the Chan School.

Sentient beings' Buddha-nature is always revealing itself, continuously emitting its radiance through the six sense faculties, without a single kṣaṇa in which its wondrous functioning does not manifest. Yet, sentient beings fail to recognize it, knowing only the illusory false-forms. Many confuse the distinction between Buddha-nature and Tathāgatagarbha, often mingling the two together. However, Buddha-nature and Tathāgatagarbha are distinct, each with different functioning. The virtuous wisdom of Tathāgatagarbha represents the functioning of its primordial essence, while Buddha-nature is one of its manifestations, brought forth by the great perceiving seed—though it too is one of the functionings of the Tathāgatagarbha. Buddha-nature relies on the Tathāgatagarbha's essence for its operation, and in turn, Tathāgatagarbha depends on Buddha-nature's functioning to bring forth all dharmas. Both are interdependent, creating and sustaining all dharmas in the three realms of existence.

When Buddha-nature operates, the Tathāgatagarbha co-joins and coordinates with the seven consciousnesses to produce and manifest all dharmas. The Tathāgatagarbha gives rise to Buddha-nature, representing an essence-functioning relationship. In addition to Buddha-nature, the Tathāgatagarbha possesses countless other virtuous functionings. These, while distinct from Buddha-nature, complement it, producing myriad dharmas. Without Buddha-nature, the Tathāgatagarbha could not perceive or bring forth all dharmas. For example, in the nirvanic state where Buddha-nature ceases to operate, the six sense faculties, six sensory realms, six consciousnesses and five skandhas also cease. Only the Tathāgatagarbha remains, and no dharmas are created.

Buddha-nature is real; it is the direct functioning of the Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence, constantly permeating and operating. As long as this functioning persists, the five skandhas, six sense faculties, six sensory realms, and six consciousnesses continue to exist. When Buddha-nature is in operation, the seven consciousnesses can cognize and perceive all dharmas.

This shows that Buddha-nature represents the functioning of the Tathāgatagarbha's nature-perceiving. Once the Tathāgatagarbha perceives all dharmas, it creates and manifests them, coordinating the construction of all dharmas for sentient beings. Without Buddha-nature, the Tathāgatagarbha cannot perceive dharmas or construct a sentient being's seven consciousnesses and five skandhas, underscoring the essential role of Buddha-nature in the Tathāgatagarbha's operation.

Chapter 12:
The Dharma-Gate of Non-Duality

1.

Non-duality is a supremely profound teaching, exemplified by the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*. Only Bodhisattvas who have attained Non-discriminating Wisdom and Subsequently Attained Wisdom can deeply grasp its meaning, while those newly awakened have yet to fully comprehend it. Without awakening to the true mind's self-nature, understanding remains superficial and unreliable.

Newly awakened practitioners are still far from fully comprehending Buddhadharma. Even those who have entered the first ground of the Bodhisattva Path, though their understanding of Buddhadharma may be quite profound, are still unable to fully grasp all dharmas. This underscores the supreme profundity and vastness of Buddhadharma, which cannot be fathomed by limited wisdom.

Progressing from studying and practicing the Buddha Way to reaching the first ground of the Bodhisattva Path signifies that one has completed only one-third of the journey to Buddhahood. Upon first awakening, one is still two-thirds away from the first ground, and the wisdom attained is only about one-third that of a Bodhisattva on the first ground. Among the entire population of Earth, likely very few who practice the Buddha Way achieve awakening to Buddha-nature, and even fewer attain the first ground fruition with perfect Non-discriminating Wisdom. In this context, mastering the truth is a rare accomplishment achieved by very few. If a Bodhisattva Mahasattva were to descend to our world and expound the supremely profound Buddhadharma, only a few would be able to accept and comprehend it.

Real Buddhadharma is the right dharma, often exerts only a weak influence because its profound wisdom does not resonate with the majority. If a Bodhisattva Mahasattva were to come to our world

and teach the supremely profound Buddhadharma, it would not be surprising if they were met with resistance and hostility. The difference in wisdom is too vast, and those just beginning their practice are unable to comprehend its depth—or worse, many do not understand it at all. Since beginners make up the majority, it is inevitable that profound dharma will be rejected.

When the Buddha first expounded the *Prajñāpāramitā Sutra*, he recognized that sentient beings were not ready to accept the profound teaching, so he presented only the outline, omitting the subtle and in-depth aspects. For instance, the *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra* touch only on the outline of ultimate reality because the conditions of sentient beings had not yet ripened. The Buddha did not reveal the actual subtle and profound content, teaching only what they could accept. Had he gone into detail about how emptiness operates within the ālaya-vijñāna—how it is both empty and pure—those lacking wisdom would not have been able to accept it. They might have lost faith and turned away from Buddhadharma altogether.

If the Buddha had expounded in detail how all forms are illusory and why they are illusory in the *Diamond Sutra*, those lacking wisdom would not have been able to accept it. Similarly, if the Buddha had delved into the intricacies of how all conditioned dharmas are like dreams, illusions or fleeting shadows, those without sufficient wisdom would struggle to understand how these dharmas resemble such phenomena. This could lead to doubt and loss of faith, hindering their study and practice. The more subtle the Buddhadharma, the more profound it becomes, making it harder to grasp. For this reason, when one first awakens to their true mind, they only perceive the general outline. Gradually, subtler aspects are understood, and Non-discriminating Wisdom develops.

In the final stage of his teaching, when sentient beings' conditions had ripened, their wisdom increased, and their faith grown stronger, the Buddha expounded in great detail the extensive discourses—Vaipulya and Yogācāra. Yet, ordinary beings still struggled to comprehend these teachings. The most profound and subtle aspects of the Buddhadharma were taught by the Buddha's Saṃbhogakāya in the highest Pure Abodes within the Form Realm,

directed toward great Bodhisattvas from the first to the tenth grounds. Even then, the Buddha adjusted his teachings according to each Bodhisattva's degree of comprehension.

When the Buddha expounded the Prajñāpāramitā and Yogācāra teachings during his lifetime, many in the audience withdrew immediately—a response not limited to his teaching of the *Lotus Sutra*. This illustrates that even when the unsurpassable Dharma-king expounds the Dharma, people still struggle to accept and believe it, signifying the heavy karmic obstacles they bear.

Even when Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva expounded the teaching, hundreds of people walked out. Śāriputra asked the great Bodhisattva, "You already knew they wouldn't accept or believe in the teaching, so why did you still expound it?" Mañjuśrī [sic; the Buddha] told Śāriputra, "Although they do not believe in this teaching now, wholesome roots have been planted in them, and the seeds are stored. Not believing in the Dharma is deprecating the Dharma, and later, when they suffer in the Hell realm, they will wonder why they endure such suffering. They will realize it is a result of not believing in the Dharma and think, 'How powerful the Dharma of the Great Vehicle must be; by not believing, I have descended to the Hell realm.' This realization will fill them with respect and devotion for the Great Vehicle Dharma, leading them to repent. Once they have repented, they will be reborn in Tuṣita Heaven and later in the human realm, where they will have the opportunity to study the Dharma and attain the Way."*

[*See *The Dwelling Place of Mañjuśrī*, 1.26 at 84000.co. A similar sutra in Chinese is the source from which Master Shengru quoted.]

This signifies the inconceivability of the virtuous merit obtained from hearing the Dharma, as well as the inconceivable power of karmic seeds. Even if we do not fully grasp Mahayana teachings, listening to them plants Dharma seeds in our Tathāgatagarbha. These seeds will eventually sprout and bear the great fruit of Bodhi. How wonderful this is! When sentient beings are influenced by the Buddhadharma, these seeds are stored within them. Therefore, we should cultivate more Dharma seeds by listening to and studying

Mahayana teachings. The more seeds we plant, the more we stimulate their growth, and the sooner we will reap the fruit.

2.

The Dharma-gate of non-duality refers to the dharma of eighth consciousness—the Tathāgatagarbha—where all dharmas and the Tathāgatagarbha are non-dual, as they are all created and manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha and are integral to it. It is akin to waves being part of the great ocean; they are not separate from the ocean. Similarly, all dharmas are like waves and forms, belonging to the great ocean of Tathāgatagarbha, arising from it and ceasing within it. Myriad Buddha-realms in the ten directions, the Flower Ornament World, and all worlds are established and exist within the Tathāgatagarbha. No single dharma can be created outside this primordial essence, which is why it is called the One Truth Dharma Realm.

The teaching of non-duality is extensively and profoundly explained in the *Vimalakīrti Sutra*. In this text, various great Bodhisattvas discuss their understanding of the subject, revealing that all spoken words, mental formations, and actions of body, speech and mind are gateways to the Dharma of non-duality. Licchavi Vimalakīrti, the last to expound on this teaching, demonstrated the essence of non-duality exquisitely. When the great Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī inquired about the nature of this non-dual teaching, Licchavi Vimalakīrti responded with profound silence. This silence fully embodied and conveyed the essence of non-duality, leading Mañjuśrī to acclaim, "This is indeed the entrance into non-duality." Such is the power of profound silence; it reveals the essence and shadow of Tathāgatagarbha, yet people in general still do not grasp its deeper meaning. While language and mental constructions of body, speech and mind reveal the Tathāgatagarbha's primordial essence, they are ultimately not the Tathāgatagarbha itself, just as a finger is not the real moon.

Does Licchavi Vimalakīrti's profound silence reveal the Tathāgatagarbha? Whether it is the finger pointing at the moon or the moon itself, even if we say it does, it does not make it the true

moon. Similarly, no matter what we do, we can only reveal the shadow of the Tathāgatagarbha, not its true essence. A true person does not display their form; a true dragon does not emerge from its cave; our eyes cannot behold such a profound reality. While we can point out where the moon is, we cannot bring forth the real moon. In the same way, we can only describe the Tathāgatagarbha, but we cannot bring forth its primordial essence. How can the Tathāgatagarbha be revealed? It is that which cannot be seen, heard, smelled, tasted or touched—a thingless thing. The best approach is to practice Prajñā and use profound wisdom to recognize it.

3.

The non-duality of form and emptiness also represents the Dharma-gate of non-duality. Here, emptiness refers to the Tathāgatagarbha—the Mind of Emptiness. Form arises from the Tathāgatagarbha, and their relationship is non-dual, though not a unity; they are neither one nor different. “Not different” means that while form is created and manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha, it is part of the Tathāgatagarbha and is its nature. “Not one” means they are not interchangeable, for the Tathāgatagarbha does not possess the characteristics of form, and form does not possess the characteristics of the Tathāgatagarbha.

Form is subject to arising and ceasing, characterized by illusion and impermanence. In contrast, the Tathāgatagarbha is non-arising, non-ceasing, formless, permanent, unchanging and true, not false. Their natures are fundamentally different: when form ceases, the Tathāgatagarbha does not cease; when form arises, the Tathāgatagarbha does not arise. Form can never substitute for the Tathāgatagarbha or possess its qualities and characteristics.

4.

The Dharma-gate of non-duality: all forms are forms of the Buddha; all sounds are sounds of the Buddha; all smells are smells of the Buddha; all tastes are tastes of the Buddha; all contacts are contacts of the Buddha; all dharmas are Buddhadharma. In this

context, the Buddha and the Buddhadharma refer to the Tathāgatagarbha, the ālaya-vijñāna, or the Dharma of Thusness. All dharmas are the Buddhadharma and are non-dual with the Tathāgatagarbha, which is why it is called the One True Dharma Realm. No single dharma can exist outside of the Tathāgatagarbha. This includes the Flower Ornament World and the World-realm, all of which exist within the One True Dharma Realm. This One True Dharma Realm is the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha.

The five skandhas and the Tathāgatagarbha are non-dual, with the five skandhas being created by and part of the Tathāgatagarbha. However, their relationship is not one of singular unity. If they were truly one, dissecting the five skandhas piece by piece would reveal the Tathāgatagarbha, and the cessation of the skandhas would result in the cessation of the Tathāgatagarbha. But this is not the case. The five skandhas and the Tathāgatagarbha are distinct, each with its own characteristics, and should not be conflated.

At the same time, the five skandhas are not entirely separate from the Tathāgatagarbha; they depend on the Tathāgatagarbha for their functions and activities and are part of its functioning. Conversely, the Tathāgatagarbha relies on the five skandhas for its manifestation. This interdependence reflects the teaching of the twelve links of dependent origination: “Consciousness causes name-and-form; name-and-form causes consciousness.” Thus, while the five skandhas and the Tathāgatagarbha are not completely separate, they are also not a singular entity; they are interconnected yet distinct.

All formations of body, speech and mind are formations of the Tathāgatagarbha. Each sense base of the twelve sense bases is a manifestation of the Tathāgatagarbha, and each realm of phenomena of the eighteen realms of phenomena is created by it. Although all dharmas are created, manifested and transformed by the Tathāgatagarbha, their relationship with it is neither one nor different, and they do not mutually interpenetrate.

In the *Āgama Sutra*, the Buddha states that the five skandhas are neither the self nor different from the Self, nor do they mutually coexist. This implies that the five skandhas and the Tathāgatagarbha are not a unified entity, nor are they binary or intermixed. Each has

its own functioning; thus, when the false one ceases, the true one remains unceasing. If they were a single unity, the cessation of one would entail the cessation of the other. The distinction between the true and the false remains clear, as the Tathāgatagarbha persists even when the skandhas cease.

5.

Though the five skandhas are not real, we should not reject their functioning; the false has its use in illusory functioning. Sentient beings live within the false forms of the five skandhas: eating, wearing clothes, walking, lying down, studying the Buddha Way and practicing—all are false forms. Yet, without them, the world cannot be established. Not a single false form can be eliminated; otherwise, we would be like Arhats entering complete extinction of existence, extinguishing our five skandhas and all forms, and there would be no Buddhahood to attain. Even after becoming a Buddha, false forms persist. The Buddha uses the arising and ceasing of these false forms as skillful means, employing their mental constructions of body, speech and mind to help and save sentient beings. This demonstrates that despite their false nature, they are profoundly useful for benefiting others. To truly understand this principle, one must first awaken to one's true mind, discerning why false forms are false and the true form is true. This understanding is not merely intellectual but experiential, and such experience is crucial for our practice.

"True" refers to the non-arising and non-ceasing true mind, while "false" refers to the arising and ceasing seven consciousnesses. Non-duality means that the false mind and the true mind are non-dual; the false mind arises from the true mind and is part of it. If both were false dharmas, they could not be non-dual. However, the true mind and the false mind are non-dual. For example, hands are an extension of the body trunk; hands and the body are non-dual, as hands cannot exist independently of the body. Similarly, a gold ring is made of gold; gold and the gold ring are non-dual; a clay figure and clay are non-dual, as are a doll made from cloth and the cloth itself; a snowman created from snow is

non-dual with snow; animal shapes in the sky formed from clouds are non-dual with the clouds; a loaf of bread made from flour is also non-dual with the flour; a plastic flower made of plastic is non-dual with the plastic; waves and forms are part of the ocean water and are non-dual with the ocean water. A gold ring can be used as gold and is non-dual with gold. Who can refute that it is not gold? The *Vimalakīrti Sutra* teaches that all dharmas and Thusness are non-dual. We should cultivate more virtues that lead to merit, and when our accumulated merit is sufficient, we will return to the right path, making the practice of the Buddha Way easier.

6. The right understanding of afflictions and birth and death

Afflictions are of an illusory nature because they are manifested and generated by the Tathāgatagarbha, with their essence being the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha. In the same way, birth and death are also illusory, as they too are manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha and share its essence. Nirvāṇa refers to the non-arising, non-ceasing, and neither coming nor going characteristic of the Tathāgatagarbha. Since Nirvāṇa is manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha, its essence is likewise the Tathāgatagarbha's nature. None of these phenomena have true substance. The Nirvanic-mind reflects the primordial essence of the Tathāgatagarbha, representing true reality, while Nirvāṇa itself is a quiescent state—completely devoid of awareness, cognition, or sensation, marked by a thorough stillness, free from any activity.

We can contemplate the Tathāgatagarbha as clay, with all dharmas being formed from this clay. The clay itself is real, and the products made from it have clay as their substance. Similarly, Nirvāṇa's essence is the Tathāgatagarbha, which is real and not merely a name we assign to it. Without clay, there would be no clay figures or clay houses; without metal, no robots; without gold, no gold jewelry. Only true dharmas can manifest—those without true essence are merely provisional names with an illusory nature and cannot manifest anything. All dharmas are creations of the mind, and if this mind were not a real existence, it could not create or

manifest them. Just as a tree needs roots to sprout, grow, and bear flowers, dharmas depend on a real foundation. While a clay figure is entirely composed of clay, it serves a different function than the clay itself, and gold jewelry serves a different function than gold. This relationship is neither identical nor entirely separate.

7.

Birth and death are Nirvāṇa, and they are non-dual, following the same principle as "form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form." This principle also applies to the five skandhas, which are of an empty nature. The five skandhas represent birth and death, but they are produced and manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha, and are its functioning—there are no real five skandhas; they are all manifestations of the Tathāgatagarbha. The Tathāgatagarbha gives rise to life and brings about death; the entire process of life and death is the functioning of the Tathāgatagarbha. If it did not give rise to the five skandhas-body, there would be no death. Thus, birth and death are inherent to the Tathāgatagarbha's nature. The Tathāgatagarbha is also referred to as the Nirvanic-mind, leading some to say that birth and death are Nirvāṇa. This is a profound teaching that requires awakening to one's true mind and entering the first ground of the Bodhisattva Path to fully comprehend.

Awakening varies in degrees. In the Chan School, it is understood through the three gates of awakening, while the Yogācāra tradition involves awakening to the operations of both consciousness-minds and the Tathāgatagarbha's seeds, known as consciousness-only wisdom. This type of awakening is profound and thorough, accessible only to great Bodhisattvas. All phenomena of birth and death are illusory manifestations of the Tathāgatagarbha —there is no actual birth or death, only the substance of the Tathāgatagarbha. If we focus solely on the cycle of birth and death without recognizing the Tathāgatagarbha, we risk being deceived and ensnared by this illusory cycle.

8.

Affliction is Bodhi; the entire process by which afflictions arise is the functioning of the Tathāgatagarbha. The Tathāgatagarbha generates the seeds of afflictions, meaning that afflictions are entirely created by it through the mano-āyatana's afflicted mental formations. Their essence is the Tathāgatagarbha itself. This is akin to shaping a poisonous snake from clay: the snake's attributes are those of the clay, making them neither identical nor entirely different. Thus, we say that the manifestation of afflictions reflects the Tathāgatagarbha, as well as its inherent attributes and nature.

9. The meaning of Thusness-like

"Thusness-like" means that a form is created and manifested by Thusness and possesses some of Thusness's attributes and characteristics. When one sees a form, one perceives Thusness, understanding that the form is transformed by Thusness. This is akin to the relationship between a child and their mother: seeing the child, one associates them with their mother, and the child and the mother are neither one nor different, just as form and Thusness are neither one nor different. "Neither one" means that the form of all dharmas is not exactly Thusness; "nor different" means that the form of all dharmas is associated with Thusness and is part of it.

If they were one, then when a dharma-form ceases, Thusness would also cease. Thusness can create the form of all dharmas, implying it could substitute itself to create all dharmas, but this is not the case. If a dharma-form were different from Thusness, it would not originate from Thusness, and without Thusness upholding and maintaining it, the dharma-form would cease to exist. Thusness is formless, while all dharmas possess form, making them significantly different. Therefore, illusory dharma-forms cannot replace the nature of Thusness.

The relationship between all dharma-forms and Thusness is neither one nor different; it includes both aspects. We should not emphasize one aspect at the expense of the other but rather embrace both when discussing them.

10.

True mind and false mind are neither one nor different. They are not one, but they are connected, similar to clay and a clay figure, or gold and gold jewelry. In principle, true and illusion are not different; illusion is manifested by the true mind. While this means that the essence is fundamentally true, the illusory form still exhibits its own characteristics and functions. For instance, the seven consciousnesses are illusory and created by the true mind, making them not different from the Tathāgatagarbha, yet they are not one with it. If the seven consciousnesses were the Tathāgatagarbha, there would be no need for contemplative meditation to verify and attain the Tathāgatagarbha; one could simply declare awakening by identifying the seven consciousnesses as the Tathāgatagarbha. However, this view is incorrect.

If eye consciousness were the Tathāgatagarbha, verifying and realizing it would be equivalent to attaining the Tathāgatagarbha easily, leading to immediate awakening. There would be no need to study both the teachings of Prajñāpāramitā and Yogācāra; understanding the five consciousnesses would suffice for everyone to quickly become awakened Bodhisattvas, eliminating further practice of the Buddha Way. Additionally, the Tathāgatagarbha itself is liberated, and if it were the same as eye consciousness, then it and the seven consciousnesses would also be liberated. This view is incorrect. The true understanding is that the Tathāgatagarbha and eye consciousness are related in a way that is neither one nor different—they are neither completely unified nor equal.

If the Tathāgatagarbha and the seven consciousnesses were one, then during a sentient being's state of dying, being in a coma or sleeping, the Tathāgatagarbha should be able to replace the seven consciousnesses to perceive, hear, touch and cognize, thereby taking over the activities of the five skandhas. In this scenario, the sentient being would be able to die peacefully, remain in a coma without concern, sleep restfully without needing to wake up and avoid reincarnation, as the Tathāgatagarbha would handle all these processes. If the Tathāgatagarbha and the seven consciousnesses were one, then in the nirvanic state, it would have to replace the

seven consciousnesses to perceive, hear, touch and cognize. However, this would contradict the Buddha's teaching on the three marks of existence, which includes the principle of quiescence in Nirvāṇa.

For example, a golden bowl and gold are neither one nor different. While the substance of the bowl is gold, its form and function are distinct from that of gold. When a bowl is needed, raw gold is not suitable. Similarly, a vase made of clay is neither one nor different from clay; they share the same substance but have different forms and functions. If they were a unified entity, a vase would be of no use in constructing a house out of clay. This illustrates that false dharmas and true dharma do not have a unified relationship; they are neither one nor different, with each having unique functions and characteristics that cannot replace each other.

Chapter 13:
The Three-Transforming Consciousnesses

1.

The first seven consciousnesses represent the functioning of the perceiving aspect—darśana-bhāga—the consciousness-minds that perceive the six sensory realms. The perceived aspect—nimitta-bhāga—refers to the six sensory realms themselves, where forms are both perceivable and perceived. The seventh consciousness, also known as the grasping consciousness—manas-vijñāna—is the mano-āyatana. It grasps the five skandhas as self and views everything as belonging to it. This consciousness clings to the eighteen realms of phenomena, the perceiving aspects of the six consciousnesses, and even the functionings of the Tathāgatagarbha as "it" and its own. It clings to anything it perceives.

While the first six consciousnesses are of dependent nature, arising when the six sense faculties come into contact with the six sensory realms, the seventh consciousness is imaginatively constructed. These consciousnesses arise as a result of contact between the senses and their corresponding realms, brought forth by the Tathāgatagarbha, and they manifest to cognize the six sensory realms.

Mano-āyatana clings to the six consciousness-minds as "it" and their cognitive functions as its own, and it clings to the six sensory realms as "it" and the forms as its own. However, when *mano-āyatana* does not cling or engage, even if the six senses come into contact with the sensory realms, no consciousness-mind arises, indicating a lack of differentiation. Conversely, when consciousness-minds do arise, they may differentiate briefly, leading to a state of "no mind"—seeing without truly seeing, hearing without truly hearing, and so on. This can occur, for example, when

one eats without tasting the food or becomes so absorbed in thought that they become unaware of their surroundings.

The mano-āyatana is weak at differentiating the actual content of phenomena in the sensory realms and relies on the six consciousnesses for this task, which then report back to it. Based on these reports, the mano-āyatana makes plans and decisions, but it requires the six consciousnesses to execute its commands. It functions like a boss giving orders to the six consciousnesses.

In contrast, the *Tathāgatagarbha* functions like a president overseeing the mental formations and activities of the seven consciousnesses. The seeds of the seven consciousnesses and the six sensory realms originate from it, encompassing both wholesome and unwholesome karmic seeds. It acts as a vast storehouse, containing everything a sentient being needs, including the seeds necessary for attaining Buddhahood. This is why it is called the storehouse—the "Tathāgata-garbha." Though this general name is used for both sentient beings and Buddhas, depending on the stage of practice, it always refers to the same primordial essence.

The Tathāgatagarbha's nature is perfected; it can perfectly fulfill all dharmas. The mental formations of body, speech and mind, the activities of the five skandhas and all karmic fruits depend on it. It establishes the mundane world and is perfected in that it never violates the law of causes and conditions, always truthfully upholding these laws without error.

When fulfilling causes and conditions, the Tathāgatagarbha neither receives orders nor is constrained. It has no views, volition or governing capacity of its own but operates in complete accord with conditions. Before Buddhahood is attained, the Tathāgatagarbha in sentient beings contains ignorance and defilements, which are the karmic seeds of the seven consciousnesses. However, the Tathāgatagarbha itself remains free from ignorance and defilements. Once ignorance is fully cut off in the seven consciousnesses, they transform into wisdom-consciousnesses, and the Tathāgatagarbha is renamed as the pure consciousness—amala-vijñāna, also known as the Great Mirror Wisdom or Thusness.

2.

All dharmas are consciousness-only, encompassing not just the eighth consciousness but also the first six and the seventh. These three-transforming consciousnesses work together to manifest all mundane dharmas within the three realms of existence. However, the source of all dharmas is the Tathāgatagarbha, which alone possesses and contains the seeds of myriad dharmas. To produce the myriad dharmas, the coordination of the seventh consciousness is required. For all dharmas to fully bring forth, the participation of the first six consciousnesses is also required. Without the involvement of these seven consciousnesses, the Tathāgatagarbha alone cannot manifest any dharma, resembling the nirvanic state of full extinction, where existence ceases entirely. Only when all eight consciousnesses work together can all dharmas be brought into existence.

The essence of the Tathāgatagarbha is entirely distinct from that of the seven consciousnesses, and they cannot be interchanged or transformed into one another. The seven consciousnesses are subject to arising and ceasing, whereas the Tathāgatagarbha neither arises nor ceases. Its primordial essence remains unchanging and undefiled, regardless of the state of purity or defilement of the seven consciousnesses.

3.

The principle of "consciousness-only" is reflected in the three-transforming consciousnesses. For example, consider using mental concentration (psychokinesis) to heal patients: mental concentration primarily relies on the strong clinging characteristic of the mano-āyatana. Regardless of distance, as long as there is a shadow or image of the subject, the power of mental concentration can reach them. This is because neither the mano-āyatana nor the Tathāgatagarbha is constrained by anything; they can extend in any direction, even to other planets or realms, including the hell realm.

Here's how it works: the mano-āyatana clings to the image of the subject and the area where the disease is located. The conscious

mind then visualizes and contemplates how the illness can be removed and how the subject's body should change. The greater the power of concentration, the more focused the conscious mind becomes. The mano-āyatana focuses solely on this specific task, and when the time is right, the afflicted area of the subject's body begins to transform and heal. In this way, gallstones can be removed, cancer cells can gradually diminish, and pain can disappear. Throughout this process, the Tathāgatagarbha conforms to the willpower of the mano-āyatana, and together with the conscious mind's visualization and contemplation, it coordinates with the two consciousnesses to transform the illness.

The degree to which the conscious mind contemplates determines the extent to which the Tathāgatagarbha can effect transformation. Disease arises when the four great elements (seeds) become imbalanced, leading to abnormalities in the body. The Tathāgatagarbha's four great seeds can realign the affected area or adjust their ratios to restore the body to its normal state. For the three-transforming consciousnesses to work together and heal the body, strong mental volition from the mano-āyatana and strong concentration from the conscious mind are required. Transforming a person's psychological cognition and ideas to align with one's volition requires even greater concentration and sufficient mental effort from both the mano-āyatana and the conscious mind, with the conscious mind possessing much stronger contemplative power.

4.

There are eight brothers who come from the same womb: one is bright, another is dull, five manage the business outside the gate, and the last handles the accounting in the house.

The first sentence illustrates the eight consciousnesses working together to form a sentient being's five skandhas, which then operate as the five skandhas-body. Among the eight consciousnesses, the dull one represents the Tathāgatagarbha. As described in the *Heart Sutra*, the Tathāgatagarbha is beyond perception: no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind; no form, sound, smell, taste, touch and object of mind; no realms of eye

consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness , tongue consciousness, body consciousness and mind consciousness. The Tathāgatagarbha does not perceive the phenomena of the six sensory realms and remains discerningly dull in the face of these phenomena. It does not know good from bad, warm from cold, and fragrant from putrid.

Mano-āyatana, the bright one, clings to all dharmas and perceives all things, albeit only their outlines. It has existed since beginningless time, never once ceasing, and continues to carry karmic propensities, clinging to all things from beginningless past. It spans from heaven to earth, knowing and reaching beyond. It can activate the appropriating functioning of the Tathāgatagarbha and thus knows everything.

Its imaginatively constructed nature allows it to cling to every dharma, grasping the Tathāgatagarbha's functionings, the six consciousnesses' functions, the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena as itself. When this appropriating nature ceases, it becomes free from clinging and ignorance. This is akin to how, when one cuts off the view of self and attains the fourth stage of fruition, they cease to cling to the self. Although the five skandhas still exist, the mind no longer perceives them as the true self. This grasping nature is not bright—avidyā; it is ignorance. Once this ignorance is removed, it becomes bright—vidyā, as the Buddha did when he severed all ignorance in his mano-āyatana.

The five brothers who manage the business outside the gate represent the first five consciousnesses. They utilize the first five sense faculties—eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body—to continuously absorb the first five sensory realms—form, sound, smell, taste and touch—and bring them back into the house. Once inside, the mano-āyatana grasps them, and the Tathāgatagarbha stores them. The sixth consciousness—mano-vijñāna—handles the accounting; it plans, intends, analyzes, determines, reasons and contemplates. It moves back and forth, making calculations and ascertaining outcomes while looking both backward and forward to formulate various goals and grand blueprints.

5.

Everything being a mind-only creation means all dharmas are produced by the true mind—Tathāgatagarbha. This includes a sentient being's five skandhas, the eighteen realms of phenomena, the physical universe and the myriad Buddha-realms in the ten directions.

When we say all dharmas are consciousness-only, we mean that everything—the phenomena of the six sensory realms—we come into contact with is a manifestation of the conjoined operations of the eight consciousness-minds. Among these, the mano-vijñāna, mano-āyatana and Tathāgatagarbha play major roles as the transforming consciousnesses that manifest all phenomena. The conscious mind, which encompasses the body, speech and mind, is characterized by arising and ceasing and lacks inherent seeds. Consequently, it is incapable of directly producing all dharmas and, therefore, is not the mind-only "mind".

The term "origination" in Dependent Origination—Pratītyasamutpāda—refers to the eight consciousnesses, while "dependent" pertains to all karmically originated conditions. Although all dharmas that arise dependently are ultimately empty, there is one that is not empty: the Tathāgatagarbha. The mental formations of body, speech and mind are driven by mano-āyatana. If the mano-āyatana is tamed, the conscious mind will not arise, leading to the cessation of these mental formations. Once the ignorance of mano-āyatana is cut off, it will have the power to cease all formations.

6.

The three-transforming consciousnesses each play a crucial role in the transformation of myriad dharmas. The Tathāgatagarbha, as the first transforming consciousness, contains the seeds of all dharmas. The mano-āyatana, the second transforming consciousness, has volition, determination and the ability to command, driving the Tathāgatagarbha to produce and manifest these dharmas. The six consciousnesses, the third collective

consciousness, analyze, imagine, study, contemplate and gather information from the six sensory realms.

The process by which these consciousnesses work together to create myriad dharmas can be illustrated through the example of transforming stone into gold with transcendental power [not to be confused with psychokinesis]. First, one must possess virtuous merits, which signifies having cultivated sufficient merits that are already stored within the Tathāgatagarbha.

Next, manifesting and fulfilling karmic fruit requires perfect causes and conditions. This means that the seeds within the Tathāgatagarbha must be ripened, and the mano-āyatana might grasp at or wish to use its own merits to benefit others.

Finally, one's mental power must be sufficient for the task. Both the conscious mind and the mano-āyatana need to be strong, exhibiting powerful single-pointed concentration and focus. The mind then directs the transformation of the object. Whatever the mano-āyatana wishes to obtain or change, the conscious mind follows this volition, contemplating both the object and the desired outcome. Meanwhile, the Tathāgatagarbha aligns with it by delivering the necessary consciousness seeds for the sixth and seventh consciousness-minds, as well as the first five consciousnesses, along with the four great seeds needed for matter transformation.

To actually turn a stone into gold, mastering alchemy or knowing gold's composition is not required. The mano-āyatana and conscious mind alone cannot create matter, as they lack the four great seeds necessary for this task. Only the Tathāgatagarbha, possessing these seeds, can perform such transformations. The role of the mano-āyatana and conscious mind is to cultivate virtuous merits, store seeds in the Tathāgatagarbha, and practice powerful concentration with attentive remembering-awareness.

The actual mechanism for transformation is carried out solely by the Tathāgatagarbha. It involves adjusting the ratio and structure of the great four seeds within the source matter, which includes altering the matter's space, density, molecular structure, and the binding state of atomic and electronic particles. The

Tathāgatagarbha continuously changes these parameters, including the quantity of the great space seed required for the transformation.

The Tathāgatagarbha is highly responsive to and compliant with the volition of the mano-āyatana. However, for it to act, the necessary seeds must already be present within it, and the conditions for manifestation must be ripe. Just as a cook cannot make a meal without ingredients, the Tathāgatagarbha requires the right seeds and conditions to create and manifest myriad dharmas.

7.

"The mind is like a skilled painter, able to depict myriad worlds; the five skandhas all arise from it; there is nothing it cannot construct." This verse, expounded by Bodhivṛkṣa Bodhisattva in the *Avataṃsaka Sutra*, illustrates how a sentient being's true mind functions like a skilled painter, creating both the five skandhas and the mundane phenomena. Not a single dharma exists outside its creation, as the five skandhas are brought into being by the mind. But how exactly does the mind construct the five skandhas?*

[*The process of a sentient being's birth is described in the *Garbhāvakrāntinirdeśa Sutra* 《佛說入胎經》, which the Buddha expounded to his half-brother, Nanda. While the terms and language in the sutra are somewhat obscure, it appears that Master Shengru has shared her direct insights on the subject, insights largely unknown to most.

This sutra, although known by many, is taught by very few. This was understandable in ancient times, but even with more women engaging in Buddhist practice today, contemporary practitioners are still not paying it much attention. A modern commentary in Chinese uses contemporary medical science to interpret the sutra, and I've extracted the digital version and placed it in a Google document (https://tinyurl.com/5c54chzr). For those interested, AI-assisted translation may provide a helpful preview. Additionally, 84000.co offers an English translation (https://84000.co/translation/toh58), with the translator noting that the sutra is an important source for understanding embryology in Tibetan medicine.]

The five skandhas begin with conception, proceed through birth and death, and encompass the stages of the form-body and the seven consciousnesses. In the intermediary state, the mano-āyatana, clinging to a form-body, reincarnates together with the Tathāgatagarbha. This leads to pregnancy and the development of name-and-form, where "name" refers to the mano-āyatana and the seventh consciousness, while "form" refers to the embryo.

Conforming to mano-āyatana's grasping at form, the Tathāgatagarbha begins to create the embryo, much like a skilled painter starting a work of art. Possessing the five universal mental factors—contact, attention, sensation, perception and volition—the Tathāgatagarbha first contacts the sentient being's karmic seeds. It focuses attention on these seeds, senses their nature (whether they belong to a human, animal or other sentient being), perceives and understands the seeds, and directs its volition to retain and form a decision. Once confirmed, the Tathāgatagarbha begins delivering the respective seeds for transformation.

Next, the Tathāgatagarbha contacts the maternal blood, focusing on its composition and sensing the four great seeds within it. After differentiating these elements through perception, it uses volition to absorb the nutrients, which are then directed toward the creation of the embryo. This concurrent delivery of the four great nutrients involves a continuous, methodical process. Throughout this process, its five universal mental factors operate continuously. It is busily engaged yet remains effortlessly active, working in an orderly and methodical manner, making this creation its primary task, reflecting the active and systematic role of the Tathāgatagarbha in constructing the embryo.

A human embryo undergoes a noticeable transformation every seven days, though changes occur kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa, with each seven-day interval marking a stage in the fetus's development. Throughout the process, the Tathāgatagarbha continuously cognizes karmic seeds and absorbs nutrients from the maternal body, applying the four great seeds to each part of the fetus. When forming the head, for instance, it senses the nature of the embryo and determines the appropriate transformations, delivering the necessary seeds to

shape the head—whether human or animal, large or small, perfectly formed or deformed—in accordance with the karmic seeds.

Similarly, when forming the limbs, eyes, ears and other organs, the Tathāgatagarbha cognizes their shape, color and position based on the karmic seeds, determining whether they will be perfect or impaired. If the fetus's karmic seeds include deformities or incomplete faculties, or if the maternal body is malnourished, the absorption of the four great seeds will be incomplete, reflecting the fetus's karmic fruit. Additionally, if the fetus is constrained by the uterine wall, resulting in deformations, this too is a karmic outcome.

Around the fourth or fifth month of pregnancy, the Tathāgatagarbha perceives that the fetus is sufficiently developed and begins to bring forth the sixth consciousness-mind. At this stage, the fetus starts to cognize its environment, and fetal movement begins. Later, the remaining consciousness-minds are developed, allowing the mother to engage in antenatal training. Once the fetus has acquired the (auditory) ear consciousness, together with the sixth consciousness, it can begin to perceive the content of such training. When the fetus is ready for birth, the Tathāgatagarbha sends forth karmic-wind [energy], initiating labor and leading to birth.

After the baby is born, the Tathāgatagarbha continues to absorb the four great substances from the food the baby eats, in accordance with the karmic seeds, to transform the body. Each day, the baby's hair, nails, muscles, bones, internal organs and limbs grow, all of which depend on the nutrients from the food and the Tathāgatagarbha's absorption of those nutrients. This process is also influenced by the baby's karmic seeds and living environment. As everything is constantly changing, the five skandhas—the body—also undergo uninterrupted change, with each transformation resulting from the Tathāgatagarbha's actions. This concludes the explanation of how the Tathāgatagarbha creates and transforms the form skandha.

Regarding the consciousness skandha, once the Tathāgatagarbha has brought forth the six consciousnesses, the six sense faculties come into contact with the six sensory realms,

influenced by the mano-āyatana's grasping. The Tathāgatagarbha continues delivering consciousness seeds to the six internal sense bases, where the Ultimate Faculty—Paramārtha-indriya—resides. Each consciousness then perceives phenomena from the corresponding sensory realm. As long as the mano-āyatana grasps at sensory objects, the Tathāgatagarbha delivers consciousness seeds, allowing ongoing cognition and perception.

The sensation skandha involves receiving and sensing experiences. After the six sense faculties contact the sensory realms, the six consciousnesses sense and receive impressions. The sensations of the first five consciousnesses are coarse, while the sensations of the sixth are subtle and refined, particularly regarding emotions and moods—all functions facilitated by the Tathāgatagarbha transmitting consciousness seeds.

The perception skandha begins with cognition, then proceeds to analysis, contemplation, reasoning and decision-making—activities primarily governed by the conscious mind. The sixth consciousness has refined and profound perceptual abilities, while the first five are less developed. These functions are similarly facilitated by the Tathāgatagarbha transmitting the appropriate seeds.

The mental formations skandha encompasses physical and mental activities, including bodily functions, speech and thought processes. This includes movement, speech construction, and mental activities such as cognition, analysis and reasoning. All of these formations reflect the activity of the Tathāgatagarbha when delivering the relevant seeds, ensuring that the body and mind function in accordance with karmic conditions and causes.

8.

The Sixth Patriarch once said, "It is not the wind that moves, nor the flag that moves; it is the mind that moves." But is it really the mind that causes the wind and the flag to move?

The three realms of existence are mind-only, and the myriad dharmas are consciousness-only; no dharma exists outside the mind. Without the original mind, no dharma can come into being. A

willow tree cannot move and sway on its own, just as the wind cannot blow or the flag flutter independently. The growth of vegetation and the existence of sentient beings do not depend solely on the sun, just as the movement of wind and flag is not inherent to their own nature. Without the true mind, there would be no wind, no flag and no movement; without the conscious mind, their existence would go unnoticed. The karmic force of sentient beings, reciprocating with mano-āyatana, results in the motion of all winds and flags. The Tathāgatagarbha aligns with this karmic force to bring about such movements. However, it is the arising of the six consciousnesses that allows us to perceive the motion; without them, no matter how the wind and flag move, it would hold no relevance to us.

The movements of the wind and flag, as experienced in our minds, are created by the three-transforming consciousnesses working together. However, their external movement is beyond the mind's control. These movements exist independently and can only be cognized once the conscious mind arises to differentiate them. Regardless of whether consciousness observes them or not, the wind and flag will continue their movement independently.

Whether the earth moves or remains still, whether the conscious mind differentiates or not, and even if sentient beings were to become extinct, the earth would continue its rotation. The appearance of movement and stillness is not a creation of the conscious mind; it is collectively produced by the Tathāgatagarbha of sentient beings. Whether consciousness differentiates or not, the physical universe will continue to manifest various phenomena of movement and stillness, darkness and light. These phenomena persist as long as a conscious mind exists, irrespective of whether sentient beings are alive, in a coma or asleep.

9.

"If one is able to transform things, then one is equal to the Tathāgata" holds two intrinsic meanings. First, it indicates that only a Buddha can completely transform things, while remaining impervious to any transformations themselves, for a Buddha has cut

off all ignorance and possesses perfect, complete virtuous merits. In a single thought, a Buddha can transform and manifest infinite five-skandha bodies and countless three-thousandfold universes. All material forms change due to the Tathāgata, so whoever can transform things is equal to the Tathāgata.

The second meaning refers to the Tathāgatagarbha, which alone has the power to transform material forms without being transformed by them. As the most powerful among the three-transforming consciousnesses, it stores all seeds of material forms and delivers the four great seeds according to mano-āyatana's volition, thus transforming and manifesting these forms. The seven false minds, lacking seeds of their own, cannot produce or transform material forms but can influence the Tathāgatagarbha to do so. Therefore, the Tathāgatagarbha is the master of all material forms.

10.

Since all material forms are created by the Tathāgatagarbha, why do we say that the three-transforming consciousnesses collectively transform and manifest myriad dharmas?

Although all dharmas are ultimately created and manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha, it alone cannot produce them without external conditions. The Tathāgatagarbha relies on corresponding conditions to bring myriad dharmas into existence; a single cause alone cannot create dharma.

Yogācāra teaches that the three-transforming consciousnesses are: the Tathāgatagarbha as the first, mano-āyatana as the second, and the first six consciousnesses as the third. The Tathāgatagarbha and mano-āyatana collectively transform and create the rebirth body and the dependent living environment. They then work together with the six consciousnesses to produce all dharmas. Without the participation of the six consciousnesses in these transformations, many dharmas would be unable to manifest. All activities of the six consciousnesses are treated as seeds and stored in the Tathāgatagarbha, which then creates myriad dharmas from these seeds according to their karmic conditions.

This process is similar to an Arhat at the fourth stage of fruition. Their formations of body, speech and mind are pure, and they no longer engage in constructing conditioned dharmas. Consequently, the seeds from the three realms of existence stop accumulating, causing the mano-āyatana to cease clinging to these realms. When an Arhat dies, they enter into a state of full extinction of existence, and in this nirvanic state, only the Tathāgatagarbha remains, so no dharmas are created. This indicates that the production of dharmas in the three realms of existence is a collective effort of the three-transforming consciousnesses. If our six consciousnesses become unconditioned and cease to construct mental formations, no seeds would be generated, and in future lives, there would be no five skandhas born, thereby ending the cycle of birth and death. In conclusion, the manifestation of dharmas in the three realms of existence requires the collective effort of all eight consciousnesses.

11.

The Tathāgatagarbha, as the first transforming consciousness, inherently possesses the ability to produce a sentient being's five skandhas-body, the six sense faculties, the six sensory realms, and the six consciousnesses. It is the direct source for the existence of myriad dharmas.

As the second transforming consciousness, the mano-āyatana is a consciousness-mind that governs and controls all mental formations at all times and in all places. It decides the construction of mental formations and constantly relies on the Tathāgatagarbha to cling outwardly to all dharmas. For any dharma it clings to, the Tathāgatagarbha conforms to its volition, creating and manifesting the respective dharma. Thus, mano-āyatana can indirectly instruct the Tathāgatagarbha to produce all dharmas.

The first six consciousnesses collectively function as the third transforming consciousness, with mano-vijñāna playing a central role in its cognitive processes. While these consciousnesses typically operate alongside one another, they can also function independently. When the "mind" comprehends something internally, it signifies the completion of cognition. The six

consciousnesses coordinate with mano-āyatana and the Tathāgatagarbha to manifest the six sensory realms. They also influence the decisions of mano-āyatana; sometimes, mano-āyatana relies on their cognition to cling to phenomena in the six sensory realms and determine whether to construct mental formations of body, speech and mind. Once the decision is made, the Tathāgatagarbha conforms to mano-āyatana to produce myriad dharmas. Thus, the eight consciousnesses, as the three-transforming consciousnesses, work together to generate myriad dharmas.

12.

If the first six consciousnesses wish to cognize the six sensory realms, they are largely controlled and directed by the mano-āyatana. Due to the mano-āyatana's grasping tendency, the Tathāgatagarbha must conform to its volition to bring forth these consciousnesses. Once produced, the six consciousnesses come into contact with the sensory realms, initiating cognition and the construction of karmic formations. The mano-āyatana continuously clings to mundane dharmas in the three realms of existence and seeks them out. Whether it can cling to or find these dharmas depends on the ripening of karmic conditions and the presence of stored seeds. If the karmic seeds are available and conditions are ripe, the Tathāgatagarbha will comply; if not, or if conditions are unripe, the Tathāgatagarbha will remain inactive.

The Tathāgatagarbha realizes the manifestations of myriad dharmas according to causes and conditions, and associated karmic seeds. The six consciousnesses then cognize and decide how to interact with them. For the six consciousnesses to manifest and function, the Tathāgatagarbha must first deliver the consciousness seeds. All dharmas are manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha in alignment with causes and conditions, and karmic seeds. If mano-āyatana's grasping and attention align with the right conditions, the Tathāgatagarbha fully complies. However, mano-āyatana's grasping and attention are contingent upon the conditions of the six consciousnesses' cognition. Decisions may be based on the results of

these cognitive processes, and the Tathāgatagarbha produces dharmas relative to mano-āyatana's mental factor of attention.

The mano-āyatana does not control the Tathāgatagarbha to manifest the myriad dharmas; instead, the Tathāgatagarbha operates according to the operational principles of facility, conformity, and non-initiative. Upon attaining our true mind, we can observe its nature of facility and assess whether it is genuinely facilitative and fully conforming. If it proves to be so, we must also recognize that there are inherent limitations—certain conditions remain unripe, and thus, the Tathāgatagarbha cannot fulfill them.

13.

How does the Tathāgatagarbha transform the structure of the four great seeds' material forms, and according to what principles?

The Tathāgatagarbha transforms the structure and ratio of the four great substances in material form based on the karmic seeds and conditions of sentient beings. It delivers the four great seeds kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa, and any slight change in the ratio of these seeds will immediately alter the substance. Depending on the karmic seeds and conditions, some transformations may take longer to manifest.

For example, if the ratio of the four great substances in a given kṣaṇa is: earth: water: fire: wind = 40:30:20:10, and in the next kṣaṇa it changes to 41:30:19:10, then to 42:30:18:10, these incremental changes in each kṣaṇa will progressively alter the substance. Over time, these changes result in noticeable transformations. This principle governs the formation, duration, decay and void of material forms in the world and the transformation of sentient beings' bodies.

In the physical universe, material transformations occur over much longer periods. This is because material forms are larger, and their changes are not immediately perceptible. Moreover, transformations involve the karmic seeds of all sentient beings, requiring close coordination among all Tathāgatagarbhas. Consequently, transformations in the cosmic and physical universe happen at a very slow pace. For instance, the deterioration of

furniture, books and papers happens gradually, reflecting the workings of the Tathāgatagarbha. Similarly, our clothes age and deteriorate over time not due to any inherent quality, but because the Tathāgatagarbha transforms them according to our karmic conditions. Thus, no material characteristics exist outside the Tathāgatagarbha, and no dharma exists outside the true mind.

The phrase "in the snap of a finger" [acchaṭā in Sanskrit] consists of 81,000 *kṣaṇas*.* During this instant, countless seeds arise, cease and transform. In the early stages, these transformations are imperceptible to us; only when they reach a certain degree do they become observable. Thus, all arising, dwelling, changing and ceasing in the three realms of existence depend on the Tathāgatagarbha. They are sustained, supported and transformed by it, making the three-thousandfold universe known as the One True Dharma Realm.

[*There is no record in the entire Tripitaka that mentions this—could it be a direct insight perceived by Master Shengru? In the *Mahasangha-vinaya Sutra* (摩訶僧祇律), co-translated by Faxian and Buddhabhadra, Chapter 17, the Buddha states that 20 thoughts make up a blink of an eye, and a blink of an eye makes up the snap of a finger. In the *Bodhisattva from Tuṣita Heaven Enters the Womb Sutra* (菩薩從兜術天降神母胎說廣普經), " Maitreya Bodhisattva explains that "in the clapping of one's hands or the snap of one's fingers, 3,210,000 thoughts arise, each shaping the next, with each shaping of thought containing its own distinct consciousness. Yet, the consciousness within each thought remains unfathomable and ungraspable.]

14.

What is the difference between mind and consciousness in "manifested by mind-only and transformed by consciousness-only"?

The term "mind" refers to the eighth consciousness, the Tathāgatagarbha, while "consciousness" denotes the eight consciousnesses. The Tathāgatagarbha is the fundamental source of all dharmas, so the three realms of existence are denoted as mind-only. However, manifesting all dharmas that we encounter requires more than just the Tathāgatagarbha; it also needs contributing conditions. Therefore, the Tathāgatagarbha collaborates with the

mano-āyatana and the six consciousnesses to bring about these manifestations. Thus, while myriad dharmas are said to be consciousness-only, their transformation involves the combined actions of the eight consciousnesses.

15.

How does the interactive relationship work between sentient beings?

In today's interconnected world, computers can control one another remotely. By accessing another computer from your own, you can help troubleshoot and fix issues. Similarly, we can visit other people's websites from our own computers via the internet. This concept is similar to the principle of healing through visualization. Just as computers can interact remotely, sentient beings' Tathāgatagarbhas are mutually pervasive and aware of each other. Without this interconnectedness, causes and conditions could not come to fruition, and sentient beings would not be able to interact.

For example, if someone is ill, a practitioner can visualize the healing of that person's illness from a distance, leading to a positive outcome. This process involves the practitioner's Tathāgatagarbha influencing the other's. Each individual's Tathāgatagarbha can communicate and be influenced by others' Tathāgatagarbha. The Tathāgatagarbha aligns with the mano-āyatana, which is further influenced by the sixth consciousness's contemplation and visualization. This mutual interaction is akin to the relationship between computers and the internet.

Thus, one person can impact another's form-body, either positively or negatively. All events affecting an individual result from the functioning of their Tathāgatagarbha. If one person influences another, this influence impacts the latter's Tathāgatagarbha. Ultimately, it's the power of these mutual influences that governs outcomes, whether beneficial or detrimental. This principle also applies to how doctors heal patients or how one's wishes are fulfilled. The results are a collective outcome of the three-transforming consciousnesses.

16.

Who is the busiest in the mundane and supramundane worlds?

In both the mundane and supramundane worlds, the Tathāgatagarbha is the most active entity. It manifests and sustains all dharmas, skandhas, bases, realms, and everything across time and space. Despite this vast involvement, it operates with its unconditioned nature and never feels busy, as it functions programmatically and maintains an equanimous state. The Tathāgatagarbha experiences neither pain nor joy, and, devoid of feelings, perception and thoughts about all dharmas, therefore remains free from fatigue.

The seventh consciousness is the second busiest in dealing with mundane dharmas. It relies on the Tathāgatagarbha to perceive and accommodate all dharmas, maintaining constant engagement with them. Although it arises from imaginative constructions and clings to these dharmas, it does not experience fatigue. If it were to rest, the Tathāgatagarbha could not function, and myriad dharmas would cease. However, this occurs rarely, and primarily for Arhats and Pratyekabuddhas, whose seventh consciousness, weary of mundane dharmas in the three realms of existence, enters the full extinction of existence, leading to the cessation of myriad dharmas. In this regard, the seventh consciousness is busier than the sixth, as it remains constantly active even during states of sleep, coma and samādhi.

While the seventh consciousness is continuously busy with mundane dharmas, it is unable to directly participate in all the activities that the Tathāgatagarbha performs. For example, while the Tathāgatagarbha manifests the mundane dharmas in the three realms of existence and the physical universe, it serves as a propelling force. However, it is completely clueless about how the four great seeds are delivered or how the rebirth body and the dependent living environment are created and manifested; it cannot participate in these processes. Similarly, it cannot perceive or participate in delivering karmic seeds; when the Tathāgatagarbha delivers the seven great seeds, it remains in the dark and is unable to participate as well. This signifies that the Tathāgatagarbha is the

busiest one, yet it never feels tired or knows how much it has contributed. In fact, the seventh consciousness is also unaware of its own busyness and never feels tired; otherwise, it would cling less to dharmas and decide to extinguish itself. However, it is able to perceive both the six consciousnesses and the body's fatigue, and because it regards them as part of itself, it decides to let the body and the six consciousnesses rest.

The sixth consciousness is the third busiest. But it often ceases and does not engage in all operations of dharmas. Its primary role involves mental phenomena related to the six sensory realms. When it engages in the solitary image realm, the five-accompanying mental consciousnesses actively work with the first five consciousnesses and assist in transmitting information to the seventh consciousness.

This situation can be likened to a military setting: the sixth consciousness functions like a staff officer who gathers and analyzes information and then briefs the commander—the mano-āyatana. The commander, while busy with decisions and tactics, experiences a different kind of busyness. The five consciousnesses are like batmen, collecting information and performing surveillance. Due to their specific roles, the six consciousnesses experience pain, joy and fatigue, and need rest. In contrast, the Tathāgatagarbha never rests. Even if the seventh consciousness abandons the three realms of existence, the Tathāgatagarbha continues its functioning without ceasing.

17.

There is a prevalent notion in today's Buddhist community about living in the present moment and seizing it. However, can we truly touch the "present moment"? What we see, hear, smell, taste, sense and perceive are not direct perceptions—pratyakṣa—of the present moment but are shadows of what has already passed. It is akin to watching a movie: what we see is a rapid succession of individual frames that together create a series of moving scenes. These scenes arise and cease momentarily; each frame is static, but the rapid succession of frames gives the illusion of continuous

movement. Although the scenes appear seamless and the objects and people seem to be moving continuously, they are merely shadows, and in fact, shadows within shadows.

The six sense faculties and the six consciousnesses perceive merely shadows of the past; there is no true "present moment," and nothing is inherently real. Although the five consciousnesses cognize directly, what they are perceiving is not the true present moment but rather shadows of the past, characterized by their arising and ceasing nature. These perceptions are illusory and not truly representative of the present. Similarly, when the five sense faculties come into contact with forms, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations, they interact with the four great particles that have undergone countless cycles of arising and ceasing. These particles are no longer in their original state, and thus, the first five sense faculties are not interacting with the original first five sensory realms.

Take sound, for example. From the moment it begins and is transmitted through a medium, its energy gradually decreases. By the time it reaches the ear faculty, its amplitude and energy have diminished. The longer the distance it travels, the weaker its energy becomes when it reaches the ear faculty. As it travels through the auditory nerve to the Ultimate Faculty in the back of the brain, the four great particles may have changed, so the sound is no longer the original sound nor the sound of the present moment. The same principle applies to the other faculties as well.

Therefore, seizing the present moment is essentially grasping at the past-present, and as far as the present is concerned, it has already occurred; even the act of saying "present" means it has already passed. Each present moment is like water flowing by, never returning. Everything we do in the present can only influence the future, not the present or the past. What is truly real and present is something that the Tathāgatagarbha encounters, but it does not differentiate and, as such, is unable to describe what it perceives to us. In this context, how should we properly approach the form, sound, smell, taste, touch and mental objects of the present? We should stop treating all dharmas as real and cease strong grasping.

It would be preferable to completely detach from grasping, as this signifies the liberation of our mind.

18.

Suppose the Tathāgatagarbha is the video cameraman and the five sense faculties are collectively the lens. The shots taken by the cameraman become the shadows of the internal six sensory realms. Is this how the internal six sensory realms metamorphose?

In this analogy, the Tathāgatagarbha represents the video cameraman, while the six consciousnesses are the viewers of the photos and images. What they see or don't see is influenced by the mano-āyatana, which directs the camera lens. Through the five or six sense faculties, the Tathāgatagarbha absorbs the external six sensory realms. These absorbed phenomena are captured as images, which then are cognized and differentiated by the six consciousnesses. The seventh consciousness acts as both conductor and controller, guiding the sixth consciousness in viewing the images and controlling the Tathāgatagarbha in capturing them. The Tathāgatagarbha conforms to the direction of the lens, absorbing the phenomena of the six sensory realms accordingly, and the six consciousnesses then begin to cognize and differentiate these images.

The direction of the lens and the scenes captured are sometimes determined by the mano-āyatana. Once it decides, the Tathāgatagarbha captures the footage. However, there are times when the Tathāgatagarbha captures footage beyond the control of the mano-āyatana, such as negative karmic affinities, grievances and karmic creditors. If the mano-āyatana could control the footage, it would likely exclude these karmas. The mano-āyatana then reacts to these results, and the six consciousnesses add their own interpretations and thoughts, akin to post-processing images. These post-production adjustments are stored by the Tathāgatagarbha as karmic seeds.

Therefore, there is a master source behind the activities of the five skandhas-body. Just as a robot is controlled by a program and a computer by its creator's programming, the five sense faculties also

require a source of power to function. This *electrical power* is crucial for their operation.

As practitioners, if we can identify this source of power and understand its mechanisms, we will attain the true reality of the Dharma Realm. Once this understanding is achieved, all dharmas will manifest.

19.

Mountains, rivers, and the great earth, too, are the collective creations of the eight consciousnesses. They existed even before sentient beings were born, formed by the collective Tathāgatagarbha through the shared karmas of all beings. The six consciousnesses did not directly participate in their creation; instead, each individual Tathāgatagarbha co-created them based on the collective karma of all sentient beings and manifested them according to each being's karmic seeds in the three realms of existence. The ignorance of each mano-āyatana caused the Tathāgatagarbha to create and manifest these phenomena. However, the six consciousnesses are also involved, as the karmic formations they construct are stored as karmic seeds, which later contribute to the dependent retribution of mountains, rivers, and the great earth. If the six consciousnesses generate significant karma, whether wholesome or unwholesome, notable changes corresponding to that karma would be reflected in the mountains, rivers, and the great earth.

20.

What is the Difference Between Consciousness-Only and Mind-Only?

Consciousness-only signifies that only the three-transforming consciousnesses are responsible for transforming and manifesting dharmas, while Mind-only refers to the Tathāgatagarbha and asserts that all dharmas are created by this true mind.

In the context of consciousness-only, each individual's consciousnesses are responsible for transforming their own five skandhas and form-body. Other dharmas are either created by an

individual's consciousness or by the collective consciousnesses of sentient beings. Although the five skandhas-body is manifested by an individual's consciousness, while we can perceive and come into contact with them, what we actually see and contact with are dharmas created and manifested by our own consciousnesses. The term "consciousness" in consciousness-only refers to the three-transforming consciousnesses, indicating that everything we perceive is created and manifested by our own three-transforming consciousnesses.

Although all seven consciousnesses perceive external phenomena, the phenomena the first six consciousnesses perceive are all internal phenomena. However, for the Tathāgatagarbha, which dharma exists outside of it? Zen ancestors often said, "There is no dharma outside the mind, yet green mountains are everywhere in front of our eyes." This suggests that no dharma exists outside the Tathāgatagarbha, and all phenomena, including green mountains, are within the Tathāgatagarbha.

Chapter 14:
The Tathāgatagarbha and Its Seeds

1.

As the name suggests, a seed is something that can grow; for instance, plant seeds produce new plants, just as dharma seeds generate all dharmas. In the Tathāgatagarbha, there are seven great seeds and karmic seeds. The seven great seeds bring forth all dharmas for sentient beings when the karmic seeds ripen. Without the karmic seeds, however, the seven great seeds would become useless. The Tathāgatagarbha uses these seeds to construct the karmic fruit of sentient beings once the seeds ripen.

2.

The seven great seeds are a permanent dharma, constituting the inherent essence of the Tathāgatagarbha and responsible for creating all dharmas. Since they have never been born, they are non-ceasing; no dharma can create them. As long as the Tathāgatagarbha exists, the seven great seeds exist, and even during the nirvanic state of full extinction of existence, they do not cease. Wherever the seven great seeds are in functioned, the Tathāgatagarbha is present, and vice versa. Therefore, the seven great seeds—earth, water, fire, wind, space, perceiving and consciousness—are non-arising and non-ceasing.

3.

The consciousness seeds are inherent within the Tathāgatagarbha, where they are stored. Once these seeds are delivered and the six sensory realms are cognized, they return to the Tathāgatagarbha, bringing back the cognized and constructed

content. The Tathāgatagarbha then records this content and simultaneously recognizes what the seven consciousnesses have constructed. If the seven consciousnesses engage in karmic acts rooted in the three poisons—greed, hatred and delusion—the returning seeds are defiled. When karmic conditions ripen, the re-delivered seeds will be defiled, causing the seven consciousnesses to exhibit greed, hatred and delusion. Conversely, if wholesome karmic acts were constructed, the returned seeds are pure, and upon re-delivery, the mental formations of the seven consciousnesses will be pure. The state of these seeds shifts dynamically from defiled to pure, and from pure to defiled, in accordance with our mental formations of body, speech and mind, reflecting a continual increase or decrease in their nature. This fluctuation does not mean that defiled and pure seeds increase or decrease simultaneously; rather, they are inversely related. In this way, the quantity of consciousness seeds stored in each Tathāgatagarbha remains fixed and does not increase or decrease, ensuring that a sentient being's wholesomeness and unwholesomeness do not rise or fall simultaneously.

4.

Is the meaning of the "four great [elements] are empty" and the "form is emptiness" as described in the Heart Sutra the same? Are the seven great seeds arising, ceasing and illusory?

"Form is emptiness" refers to the Mind of Emptiness, the Tathāgatagarbha, while "the four great are empty," as understood by ordinary people, refers to non-existence, nothingness and illusion. Ordinary people do not recognize the presence of the Tathāgatagarbha within them, nor do they know that this true mind uses its four great seeds to generate and manifest all dharmas. From the perspective of the Hinayana teachings, the form-body and the resultant physical world, composed of the four great elements, are empty, illusory and unreal, lacking both a self and any sense of belonging to a self.

However, from the Mahayana perspective, the four great elements are inherent seeds within the Tathāgatagarbha, and their

functionings represents the functionings and characteristics of the Tathāgatagarbha. Therefore, they are part of the Tathāgatagarbha and share an "neither one nor different" relationship with it. In this sense, the form composed of the four great elements is also part of the Tathāgatagarbha and shares the same characteristics. Thus, the meaning of "the four great are empty" aligns with "form is emptiness."

The seven great seeds are also inherent within the Tathāgatagarbha. Since the Tathāgatagarbha is non-arising and non-ceasing, its seeds share the same nature. Even in the nirvanic state, they continue to exist, although they temporarily cease functioning.

Sentient beings are composed of the seven great seeds; however, their existence is illusory, subject to arising, ceasing and transformation. The five skandhas—form, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness—along with the form-body and consciousness-minds, are impermanent. The form-body consists of earth, water, fire, wind and space, while the other four skandhas are functions of the six consciousnesses, which are generated by the consciousness seeds. Anything created after the fact is impermanent and will eventually decay and cease. Moreover, it is already illusory during its formation, let alone in the state of cessation.

5.

Questions regarding the karmic seeds and their quantities.

Seeds denote functioning and boundaries, and refers to the seven great seeds inherent within the Tathāgatagarbha, which can bring forth sentient beings' five skandhas, their eighteen realms of phenomena, and manifest the physical universe. Once we understand the distinctions of these seeds and their boundaries, we attain Omniscient Wisdom and perfect Buddhahood. Although the number of seeds is infinite, they are non-increasing and non-decreasing; the fixed quantities allow us to know all their functionings and characteristics eventually, thereby attaining Buddhahood. If their quantities were to change continuously, we

would be unable to comprehend them all, preventing the attainment of Buddhahood. If they were perpetually increasing, we would need to explore them indefinitely, and our ignorance would never be cut off.

The non-increasing and non-decreasing nature of the Tathāgatagarbha encompasses three aspects. The first refers to the unchanging functionings and characteristics of the Tathāgatagarbha, which neither increase nor decrease. The second concerns the total number of Tathāgatagarbhas: one Tathāgatagarbha exists for each sentient being, and each sentient being has their own Tathāgatagarbha, which is why the Buddha says the realm of sentient beings neither increases nor decreases. In the Dharma Realm, the number of sentient beings' Tathāgatagarbhas does not change; even when an Arhat enters the full extinction of existence, their Tathāgatagarbha continues to exist, so there is no decrease. Similarly, the Tathāgatagarbha does not increase, as it is non-arising and non-ceasing, without a beginning of existence; it has existed since beginningless time and is not a dependently originated dharma. The third aspect refers to the non-increasing and non-decreasing nature of the seven great seeds, which allows them to manifest myriad dharmas without obstruction.

The seven great seeds themselves are inherently pure, while sentient beings' karmic seeds are both pure and defiled. Defilement signifies dullness [ignorance], while purity denotes brightness. Although the attributes of brightness and dullness are changeable, the total quantity of seeds remains constant; the seeds transform but are never extinguished. When defiled seeds decrease, pure seeds increase accordingly. This transformation is what is meant by "turning afflictions into Bodhi" and "transforming consciousness into wisdom." What increases is the part that decreases; as dullness lessens, brightness increases. For example, learning a new vocabulary word signifies the removal of ignorance regarding that word; similarly, if we don't understand a particular dharma but later comprehend it, our ignorance of that dharma turns into wisdom, signifying the transformation of dullness into brightness. When we fully comprehend all dharmas, both mundane and supramundane, we are thoroughly illuminated by brightness and attain perfect

Buddhahood. At that point, there is no more dharma to study and no remaining ignorant seeds to transform. This principle reflects the non-increasing, non-decreasing quantity of seeds.

6.

The seeds of earth, water, fire and wind are inherent within the Tathāgatagarbha. When karmic conditions are met, these seeds are utilized to create a form-body, the five sense faculties and the six sensory realms for sentient beings, as well as the physical universe and myriad Buddha-realms in the ten directions. This process fulfills their direct reward body—phala-kāya—and their environmental reward—bhoga-phala—necessary for their existence.

The seven great seeds inherently exist; when the Tathāgatagarbha delivers the great consciousness seeds, it brings forth the seven consciousnesses and enables their functions, thus fulfilling the five skandhas for a sentient being's activities. The four great seeds play a crucial role in the form-body, sustaining its life and activities. An imbalance in these four great seeds results in illness, which affects the consciousness-minds and leads to suffering. Our body and mind are interdependent and mutually influential; maintaining a healthy body supports a balanced mind, and a healthy mind-consciousness promotes physical well-being.

7.

The Tathāgatagarbha distributes the four great seeds in varying ratios to create the rebirth body and the dependent living environment. A greater proportion of earth seeds results in solid physical elements, while a higher ratio of water seeds leads to soft and wet substances. More fire seeds make materials warm or hot, and a higher ratio of wind seeds renders elements light and fluid. When constructing a form-body with bones, nails, hair, muscles and tendons, the Tathāgatagarbha delivers a precise amount of earth seeds, knowing exactly how many are needed. We are unaware of the exact quantity required during this process because, at the time of body formation, there is no "I" yet in existence, and the conscious

mind has not emerged. Even if the sixth consciousness were present, it could not discern this information. Only the Tathāgatagarbha, which cognizes karmic seeds, knows the exact amounts of water, fire and wind seeds required, as well as the correct proportions for constructing blood, brain plasma and marrow.

The Tathāgatagarbha knows precisely when and how to form each part of the body, including its shape, gender, color, and whether it will assume a human, animal or non-human form. It determines when the consciousness-minds will arise, when the fetus is ready to be born, and, after birth, is aware of everything related to the form-body and the five skandhas of the baby. This includes knowing how the baby should grow, potential illnesses, the onset of aging and the signs of dying. It also knows when to leave the form-body, what type of body to manifest in the intermediate state, the realm into which the sentient being should be reborn, and the karmic affinity with future parents—knowledge beyond our understanding. The Tathāgatagarbha comprehends the creation, destruction and formation of the physical universe, including mountains, rivers and vegetation.

This represents its state of wisdom: it is free from ignorance of all dharmas, fully aware of all dharmas, contemplative of all dharmas, transformative of all dharmas, and manifesting all dharmas. Its functionings and virtues are infinite, and we will fully understand these dharmas only upon attaining Buddhahood.

8.

Are the four great fundamental particles—paramāṇu—permanently abiding dharma?

The four great fundamental particles are not permanent dharmas. They are always arising and ceasing, thus they do not possess the characteristic of permanence or unchanging nature. The only permanent dharma is the Tathāgatagarbha.

The four great seeds, which are composed of these fundamental particles, are inherently part of the Tathāgatagarbha. While they are

always within the Tathāgatagarbha and therefore can be considered as permanently abiding in this context; they are not self-sufficient in functioning as they require causes and conditions to operate. For example, in the nirvanic state, these seeds cannot create any dharma because their functionings is contingent on specific conditions. If they were subject to arising and ceasing, they would disappear from the Tathāgatagarbha during that state, leading to a paradox when an Arhat exits Nirvāṇa and re-emerges with a form-body through the re-emergence of the four great seeds.

The Tathāgatagarbha, being formless, contains and stores the formless seven great seeds permanently. This implies that even in the state of Nirvāṇa, these seeds are preserved within the Tathāgatagarbha, ready to be used when conditions are appropriate for the re-creation of dharmas.

9.

Definition of Seeds.

Seeds in the context of the Tathāgatagarbha embody the meanings of generation and manifestation, much like how plant seeds sprout and grow. These seeds, which are the root of all dharmas, are sometimes referred to as “causes” or “elements.” They include both inherent seeds and karmically constructed seeds.

Their nature is formless, allowing them to be stored in the formless Tathāgatagarbha. This formless quality enables these seeds to be delivered for the creation and manifestation of myriad dharmas and the three realms of existence when conditions are met. Thus, the formless Tathāgatagarbha serves as the repository and facilitator for these seeds, enabling the diverse expressions and phenomena within the three realms of existence.

10.

Are the six realms of earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness always coexisting with the Tathāgatagarbha, or does the latter exist before them?

The six, or seven great seeds are all inherent seeds; they do not arise after but always exist within the Tathāgatagarbha. When causes and conditions are met, these seeds give rise to the creation of a sentient being's five skandhas, the eighteen realms of phenomena, and their dwelling place.

Initially, when a sentient being's karmic seeds ripen, the Tathāgatagarbha delivers the five great seeds of earth, water, fire, wind, and space to create the environment and physical universe in which the being will live. After this living environment is established, the same five great seeds are again delivered to form the sentient being's body. Next, consciousness seeds are delivered to bring forth the conscious mind, followed by the seeds for the first five consciousnesses. In this way, the being's five skandhas and seven consciousnesses are fully developed, enabling them to leave the womb and begin life in the mundane world. The mano-āyatana is involved throughout this process, while the Tathāgatagarbha conforms to the mano-āyatana for creation.

11.

Some say that only earth, water, fire and wind are the four great seeds, while the other three seeds—space, perceiving and consciousness —are neither great nor encompassing, and thus should not be considered seeds. Is this true?

Seeds encompass the meanings of generation and transformation, similar to how a flower seed can grow into a flower and a tree seed can grow into a tree. The seven great seeds, including earth, water, fire, wind, space, perceiving and consciousness, are all-encompassing and capable of transforming into various dharmas, giving rise to specific functionings and characteristics.

The four great seeds—earth, water, fire and wind—coalesce to create the physical universe and pervades the three realms of existence. Places with form are composed of the four great seeds—earth, water, fire and wind—while formless places are constituted by the great space seed. This great space seed also exists within material forms, as it provides the necessary interstices and density;

without it, there would be no space for the flow or transmission of other substances within material forms.

In the absence of material, what remains is defined as empty space. As stated in the *Shurangama Sutra*, "The empty space in the ten directions is like a cloud patch in the sky born from one's mind." This suggests that empty space originates from the Tathāgatagarbha and lacks form, distinguishing it from material forms. Maitreya Bodhisattva similarly noted in the first volume of *Yogācārabhūmi Śāstra* that empty space, darkness and light are relative to the eye faculty and are perceived by eye consciousness, therefore, empty space belongs to a type of material form. Where eye consciousness reaches, it perceives colors and space, indicating that empty space is created by the great space seed. This great seed is neither useless nor functionless; its role is significant. The Buddha established the great space seed to signify its true functioning. Without it, there would be no density, solidity and empty space to accommodate material forms, and no world could be established.

In the *Discourse of the Father and Son Sutra*《父子合集經》, [a teaching that the Buddha gave to his father, Śuddhodana,] the Buddha mentions the six realms: earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness. These six realms are the six great seeds, where "realm" refers to the functional boundaries of seeds. This indicates that the great space seed is indeed a great seed with distinct functional boundaries, different from the functionings and characteristics of the other great seeds. The empty space created by the great space seed is different from the obstructive material dharmas and from the seven consciousnesses produced by the consciousness seeds. This demonstrates the unique functioning of the great space seed; otherwise, the worlds in the ten directions would not be established.

Similarly, the great consciousness is also a seed. Once delivered, it gives rise to the seven consciousnesses, each with its own functions and differentiations. This process is analogous to how flowers and trees grow from seeds. Likewise, the great perceiving seed, once delivered, endows the Tathāgatagarbha's essence with nature-perceiving. This enables it to perceive, operate, manifest, and perfect all dharmas in the mundane world. Just as we rely on

eye consciousness to see forms and engage in activities, the Tathāgatagarbha relies on its nature-perceiving to perform all dharmas.

Evidence of the existence and all-encompassing nature of the seven great seeds can be found in the *Shurangama Sutra*. In Chapter 3, it states:

"Ananda... given that the fundamental nature of empty space is all-pervasive and unmoving, know that the true natures of earth, water, fire and wind—along with empty space—constitute the five great elements. Their natures are perfect and unified; they all embody the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, which is inherently non-ceasing and non-arising... Within the Tathāgatagarbha, the nature of awareness is true emptiness, and true emptiness is the nature of awareness. Both are fundamentally pure and extend throughout the Dharma Realm."

This passage indicates that "empty space" refers to the great space seed, which pervades the Dharma Realm. Empty space extends throughout the ten directions and is a generation and manifestation of the Tathāgatagarbha's great space seed. It is not composed of the four great elements nor created by them; rather, it is produced by the great space seed.

The sutra continues:

"...Given that nature-perceiving (referring to the great perceiving seed), hearing and awareness are all-pervasive and unmoving, understand that these, along with the boundless and immovable nature of space (the great space seed), as well as the moving elements of earth, water, fire and wind, make up the six great elements. Their natures are perfect and unified, and they all embody the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, which is inherently non-ceasing and non-arising... Within the Tathāgatagarbha, nature-perceiving is illuminating awareness, and the nature of awareness is clear perceiving. Both are fundamentally pure and extend throughout the Dharma Realm, conforming to the mind-field of sentient beings. The nature-perceiving pervades the entire Dharma Realm, as do the nature of the ear, nose, tongue, body and mind (referring to the sense faculties engaging with sensory realms and resulting in awareness of hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking), which possess illuminating and wondrous

virtues, extending throughout the Dharma Realm and the spaces of the ten directions, pervading everywhere."

The Buddha explains that "perceiving" is also a great seed, pervading the entire Dharma Realm and encompassing the ten directions. The great perceiving seed gives rise to the perceiving faculty, which enables the seven consciousnesses to see, hear, smell, taste, touch and cognize.

The sutra further clarifies:

"...this consciousness-mind (referring to the great consciousness seed) does not originate from any place. Its nature-perceiving is therefore akin to the other great seeds—perfect, illuminating, and neither coming nor going. Alongside the four great seeds and the great space seed, the great perceiving and great consciousness seeds together constitute the seven great seeds. Their natures are perfect and unified; thus, they all embody the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha, which is inherently non-ceasing and non-arising... The nature of the (six) consciousnesses reflects the pure cognitive nature of the Tathāgatagarbha; the Tathāgatagarbha's awareness is the true nature of these consciousnesses. This wondrous awareness is illuminating, extending throughout the Dharma Realm and the empty spaces in the ten directions and pervading everywhere."

The Buddha clearly states that great consciousness is a great seed that generates the seven consciousnesses, possessing cognition and differentiation. It pervades the entire Dharma Realm, capable of encompassing and generating empty space in the ten directions.

In conclusion, the seven great seeds exist simultaneously with one another, forming a sentient being's five skandhas, the eighteen realms of phenomena, and the physical universe. They are fundamentally pure, extending throughout the Dharma Realm, perfect and illuminating, and shaped by the karmas of sentient beings.

12.

Each material form is composed of the four great seeds: earth, water, fire and wind. These elements themselves are also made of

the same four seeds. Material forms manifest distinct characteristics based on these elements: water has properties like moistness, the ability to drown, strength, temperature and fluidity; wind exhibits qualities such as drifting, strength, temperature and hardness, which can cause discomfort when it blows against the body; fire is defined by its temperature, flammability, strength, fluidity, movement and moistness; and earth is solid, moist, temperate, and capable of movement.

13. The great space seed in Tathāgatagarbha

As stated in the *Shurangama Sutra,* "Within the Tathāgatagarbha, the nature of awareness is true emptiness, and true emptiness is the nature of awareness; they are fundamentally pure and extend throughout the Dharma Realm." This signifies that the nature of the great space seed and the nature of the Tathāgatagarbha share a neither-one-nor-different relationship. The great space seed pervades the Dharma Realm in all ten directions, creating empty space. The phrase "the empty space in the ten directions is like a cloud patch in the sky born from one's mind" refers to the Tathāgatagarbha's mind, indicating that empty space originates from the Tathāgatagarbha and is merely a tiny part of it, like a patch of cloud in the sky.

Where does empty space come from in our world on Earth? Where do the gaps in material objects originate? What is the source of space in our living environments, within our bodies, and even within our cells? Regardless of its size, empty space arises from nothing, indicating its arising and ceasing nature—evidence that it is the great space seed bringing it forth. Myriad dharmas are created by the Tathāgatagarbha, and empty space is among them, also formed by the Tathāgatagarbha through its great space seed.

The empty space created by the Tathāgatagarbha exists both externally and within our bodies. External empty space allows for the containment of all material forms, enabling substances to function, sounds, smells and gases to spread, and energy to transmit —thus making life possible. This external space, collectively formed and maintained by the great space seed delivered from all sentient

beings' Tathāgatagarbhas, is essential for establishing worlds in all ten directions, where stars move, and sentient beings carry out their activities.

Various materials contain interstices and gaps, with variations in these spaces leading to differences in substance structure and density, and thus their physical characteristics. Much like external empty space, the gaps within substances are collectively formed and maintained by the great space seed, which arises from the Tathāgatagarbhas of all sentient beings. The density of a substance is influenced by the composition of the great space seed; different ratios of this seed result in varying structures and physical properties. If the composition of earth, water, fire and wind is uniform within a substance, variations in the great space seed's ratio will affect its volume and density.

Take hardtack, for example. It differs from a regular cracker because it is compressed, leaving less space, reducing moisture, and increasing the ratio of the great earth element, resulting in greater density. When a substance expands, it signifies an increase in the ratio of the great space element, causing its volume to grow and density to decrease—reflected in its physical characteristics.

Different spaces also result in different amounts of energy generated by the movement of matter. Consider pole vaulting: the length of the run-up varies. If it's too long or too short, the jumping power decreases. However, with the optimal run-up distance, momentum builds, energy increases, and the jump becomes more powerful, allowing for greater height or distance. Similarly, when throwing a stone at a wall, the force of impact depends on the distance from the wall. Greater momentum leads to a stronger impact and more damage, whereas shorter distances produce less force and less damage.

Thus, empty space is a critical dharma. When beings gather in small spaces, they cannot live comfortably. For example, when raising chickens, if their living space is too confined, they may become ill or even die.

Space includes both the empty spaces collectively created by the Tathāgatagarbhas of all sentient beings, as well as the individual

spaces, gaps and interstices created by each being's Tathāgatagarbha. The spaces within the body are formed solely by one's own Tathāgatagarbha using the great space seed, including the interstices within cells. The body contains gaps and empty spaces, all individually generated by each being's Tathāgatagarbha.

These internal spaces allow for the flow of food, gas and blood, enabling beings to breathe and sustain life. Spaces exist not only in the organs but also within bones, muscles and fluids. Even within the smallest cellular tissues, there are gaps, with interstices in molecular structures allowing for the movement of particles like molecules and ions, which enable metabolism. The differing ratios of the great space element in molecules cause variations in molecular structures, resulting in different properties and functions within the body. The five great elements are present everywhere and form the three realms of existence for sentient beings.

Empty space is a form-dharma, a directly perceived state of eye consciousness, and a condition brings forth the eye and ear consciousnesses, signifying its arising and ceasing nature. Unlike imagined elements like a turtle's hair or a rabbit's horn, empty space is not a mere mental construct. Imaginary elements cannot be seen by eye consciousness or cognized—they are invalid perceptions of the sixth consciousness. In contrast, empty space serves as the "boundary of material form"—rūpa-paryanta-rūpa. Once it is perceived by eye consciousness, it is recognized as empty, confirming that it is a conditioned dharma, arising and ceasing.

In the nirvanic state, there is no empty space, which indicates that both empty space and void are creations of the great space seed. This demonstrates that the great space is one of the fundamental seeds, capable of generating empty space, gaps and interstices, allowing sentient beings to inhabit the space and enabling material forms to function within it. Without this element, neither the five skandhas nor the mundane world could exist. This *emptiness* is the Tathāgatagarbha, and the great space, which extends in all directions and pervades the entire Dharma Realm, is the Tathāgatagarbha's nature.

As stated in the *Shurangama Sutra*, "Empty space is created within the great essence of awareness, like a bubble in the ocean,"

denoting that empty space is akin to a bubble that will eventually disappear, underscoring its illusory nature. This suggests that the empty space generated by the Tathāgatagarbha has functional purposes—without it, no dharma could exist or operate—but its functions are temporary, marked by arising and ceasing. In the nirvanic state, where only the Tathāgatagarbha remains, not even the smallest gap exists, let alone vast empty space. Therefore, the great space is a seed that generates various spaces, but both the void and the empty spaces it creates are ultimately nothing more than expressions of the Tathāgatagarbha's nature.

14.

Are karmic seeds manifest through the seven great seeds?

When karmic seeds ripen, the Tathāgatagarbha discerns them and delivers them so that these karmic seeds can manifest, allowing an individual's karmic fruits to come to fruition. But how does the Tathāgatagarbha fulfill these fruition, and in what form? karmic fruits are none other than the states of one's body and mind. Changing their fruits means altering the individual's physical and mental states, as well as their living environment.

How, then, are the body and mind manifested and transformed? The Tathāgatagarbha delivers the six great seeds—earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness—and, with cooperation from the great perceiving seed, these seeds work together to transform the state of body and mind. Similarly, the seven great seeds are delivered for this transformation, reshaping the composite structure of the four great seeds to manifest the state of body and mind.

The formation and transformation of an individual's physical body and their living environment are realized through the four great seeds and the great space seed, as is the physical universe itself. All dharmas in the three realms of existence are formed by the seven great seeds, along with the manifestations of karmic fruits. In these manifestations, form-dharmas are co-created by the four great seeds and the great space seed, mind-dharmas are shaped by consciousness seeds, and the great perceiving seed forms the

Tathāgatagarbha's nature-perceiving, guiding the creation and transformation of all dharmas.

Without the seven great seeds, there would be no form-dharmas and mind-dharmas, and thus no physical bodies, consciousness-minds and living environments for sentient beings. The world would be empty, with neither karmic actions nor the fulfillment of karmic fruits. Therefore, whatever the karmic fruits may be, their manifestation and fulfillment require the cooperation of the seven great seeds with karmic seeds.

15.

When a significant weather change is approaching, many people physically sense it. For example, some may experience migraines as cold air or rain draws near, and patients with rheumatic disorders often feel joint pain. One explanation is that these symptoms result from a major environmental shift in the physical universe, causing an imbalance in the four great elements within the body. However, these symptoms are also considered karmic fruits. Additionally, although certain conditions may emerge before a major event in the environment, the six consciousnesses might not recognize them. Instead, the mano-āyatana perceives these changes and clings to the body, leading to physical reactions. Is this how the process works?

The physical universe is composed of the four great seeds—earth, water, fire and wind—just like material form-dharmas and form-bodies. In essence, the body is no different from material form-dharmas like rocks and wood. The only distinction is that an individual's Tathāgatagarbha uniquely maintains and sustains the body, allowing it to function independently, whereas material form-dharmas are collectively maintained by the collective Tathāgatagarbha. This difference gives rise to distinct characteristics between the form-bodies of sentient beings and material form-dharmas.

An individual's form-body, singularly manifested and maintained by their Tathāgatagarbha, belongs to its direct object condition—sālambana-pratyaya. In contrast, material form-dharmas, collectively maintained by multiple Tathāgatagarbhas,

belong to the indirect object condition—dūrālambana-pratyaya—of those Tathāgatagarbhas. Due to these differences, the characteristics and operating modes of the Tathāgatagarbhas vary accordingly.

An individual's form-body, directly cognized by the Tathāgatagarbha, involves three key aspects. First, the Tathāgatagarbha must continuously alter the four great seeds according to the individual's karmic seeds to enable transformation. Second, the four great seeds are constantly being modified in response to external environmental conditions, ensuring the ongoing transformation of the form-body. Third, these changes in the four great seeds, along with the transformation of the form-body and the functions of the five skandhas, operate in accordance with the mental formations of the mano-āyatana.

When the physical universe is created, each Tathāgatagarbha collectively cognizes indirect object conditions based on the collective karmic seeds and factors of sentient beings. This results in the continuous transformation of material form-dharmas through the modification of the four great seeds. The entire process does not involve the functioning of the five skandhas.

As changes occur in the external physical universe, the living environments of sentient beings also shift, leading to the alteration of material form-dharmas. These external form-dharmas can influence the form-body and, consequently, effect the consciousness-minds. The process unfolds as follows: external form-dharma is part of the external sensory realm of each sentient being; the Tathāgatagarbha absorbs the four great particles—formed by the four great seeds—from external materials through the body faculty to modify its form-body's particles. For example, when the weather becomes colder or when it rains, the great water seed shifts, prompting the Tathāgatagarbha to absorb these great water particles. This increases moisture in the form-body, potentially causing one to feel damp, and may trigger joint pain in those with rheumatic disorders.

How does the Tathāgatagarbha absorb the four great particles from various materials? Suppose your Tathāgatagarbha does not

participate in transforming other sentient beings' form-bodies—how can it absorb particles from transformations it did not initiate?

The Tathāgatagarbha is unable to directly absorb the four great particles; instead, material form-dharmas constantly release them as the four great seeds form new particles within these materials. Because all materials are in a constant state of arising, ceasing and transmuting, resulting in the continuous release of four great particles. This allows the Tathāgatagarbha to absorb particles from external materials and other sentient beings, facilitating the formation of internal material matters and mental objects while changing the structure of the four great particles within its own form-body.

Since all material form-dharmas continuously release the four great particles in each kṣaṇa, they affect their surroundings, reflecting the principle of the magnetic field. Each sentient being's form-body releases bioelectricity and possesses a magnetic field, as do material form-dharmas, which emit energy and maintain their own magnetic fields. This creates attraction and repulsion between materials, and these dynamics are mirrored in the interactions between sentient beings with similar characteristics.

16.

Can seven consciousnesses bring forth other dharma?

The seven consciousnesses are generated by the consciousness seeds within the Tathāgatagarbha. As created dharmas, they are subject to impediments and lack a self-governing nature, meaning they do not possess the seeds to create other dharmas or the ability to store seeds. Only the Tathāgatagarbha has the generative capacity to produce the five skandhas, the eighteen realms of phenomena and myriad dharmas. Due to their arising and ceasing nature and their inherent impediments, the five skandhas, the eighteen realms and myriad dharmas cannot create further dharmas on their own. The seventh consciousness serves as an auxiliary condition for the Tathāgatagarbha to produce the six sensory realms. Together with the Tathāgatagarbha, the seventh consciousness contributes to the

formation of the three-transforming consciousnesses, which collectively have the power to bring forth all dharmas.

17.

How can one clearly perceive the eight consciousnesses as current—ogha—and transform them into wisdom?

The seven great seeds in the Tathāgatagarbha arise and cease kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa, driving the constant flux of the five skandhas, the eighteen realms of phenomena and the physical universe. These seeds are perpetually active, mirroring the ceaseless arising, ceasing and transformation of the five skandhas and the mundane world. Similarly, karmic seeds within the Tathāgatagarbha, propelled by karmic force, perpetually manifest, causing sentient beings to be continuously influenced by their karma and to experience the fruits of their actions.

To transform the eight consciousnesses into wisdom, one must first illuminate the mind and see one's nature, aligning it with the nature of Thusness. This process involves gradually extinguishing afflictions and fully dissolving karmic propensities. As these obstructions are removed, wisdom will progressively develop and flourish.

18.

The four great seeds are inherent in the Tathāgatagarbha, and their conjunction gives rise to various material form-dharmas. The four great particles, the smallest components of these seeds, accumulate to form larger granules. As these granules continue to aggregate, they create diverse material form-dharmas. Different configurations of these granules result in a multitude of material form-dharmas, contributing to a colorful world with each serving its purpose for sentient beings. In essence, this is the functioning of the Tathāgatagarbha, though sentient beings often remain unaware of it.

Upon a sentient being's birth, their Tathāgatagarbha, in conjunction with the Tathāgatagarbha of other sentient beings, collectively delivers the four great seeds, participating in the transformation of the physical universe's external perceived aspects. The collective Tathāgatagarbha then continue to uphold and sustain these aspects. When a sentient being's five sense faculties encounter an external perceived aspect and the conditions are sufficient, their Tathāgatagarbha absorbs the four great particles through the first five sense faculties. These particles are then transmitted to the Ultimate Faculty, located at the back of the brain, for the manifestation of the internal perceived aspect. When the Ultimate Faculty contacts with the internal perceived aspect, it brings forth and manifests the six consciousnesses. This process results in the interaction of the sense faculties, sensory realms and consciousnesses, enabling the six consciousnesses to cognize the internal six sensory realms.

Why do the four great seeds exported by Tathāgatagarbha result in the formation of material form-dharma? First, without the operation of the consciousness-minds, the four great seeds are powerless to form material form-dharma—it is Tathāgatagarbha that actively utilizes its four great seeds to transform form-dharma. All dharmas, once separated from Tathāgatagarbha, immediately cease and vanish without a trace. The four great seeds, once exported, transform into the four great particles. Each individual's Tathāgatagarbha then collectively uses these particles to create, manifest and sustain material form-dharma, with continuous changes occurring. So, who decides the sequence of the four great seeds? While each Tathāgatagarbha makes the decision, do they take the initiative? No, it is dictated by each sentient being's karmic seeds.

19.

What forms the material?

Material form-dharma is composed of the five great seeds: earth, water, fire, wind and space, with the great water seed having a larger proportion, which allows it to form fluid. Water consists of

water molecules containing hydrogen and oxygen atoms. Each atom comprises smaller particles such as protons, neutrons and atomic nuclei. Every tiny particle is made up of the four great seeds—earth, water, fire and wind—along with the great space seed. The great space creates interstices within the particles, enabling them to move along spatial orbits. Different arrangements and combinations of these five great seeds result in the formation of various particles, which then lead to different forms of movement.

Water contains the great earth seed, which provides solidity and creates resistance; its temperature, whether hot or cold, is due to the great fire; its fluidity arises from the influence of the great wind; and within water molecules, the great space seed forms interstices. When water is heated, the arrangement and movement of the five great seeds within the particles shift, altering its physical properties and transforming liquid water into gaseous steam. Conversely, when water cools below freezing, the arrangement and movement of the particles change, turning liquid water into solid ice.

The four great seeds do not transform into one another. The great water seed, regardless of the conditions, always remains the great water seed; it cannot become any of the other great seeds. Physical properties change only when the arrangement of the mixed seeds shifts or when the structure of the seeds is altered.

The seven great seeds cannot be altered by external conditions, nor can their inherent nature be changed by the Tathāgatagarbha itself. The great water seed cannot turn into the great earth seed—this principle does not exist in the Buddhadharma. If such a transformation were possible, the material world would become chaotic, and the seeds within Tathāgatagarbha would be in disarray. If the great water could become the great earth, the Tathāgatagarbha would lack the great water, leaving only six great seeds. Without one of the great seeds, neither sentient beings' physical bodies nor material forms could exist, leading to the non-existence of both the material world and the world itself. In such a scenario, not only would this world cease to exist, but so would the worlds in all ten directions.

20.

All materials we perceive are merely aggregates of particles formed by the four great particles and lack any true solid physical form. These particles are in a constant cycle of arising, ceasing and transmuting, driven by the Tathāgatagarbha's ongoing process of exporting and importing the four great seeds and particles. Thus, the Tathāgatagarbha is intrinsically linked with external form-dharma. Since all four great particles stem from the Tathāgatagarbha, this does not imply that it either contacts or does not contact the four great particles and the external six sensory realms. It is simply the natural functioning of the Tathāgatagarbha to transmit these particles from the external six sensory realms to various locations. For instance, if one had infinite manifested form-bodies [the term in Chinese signifies a general concept, potentially implying a Bodhisattva's mind-made bodies; advanced Taoist practitioners are also said to manifest such bodies], it would be natural for their Tathāgatagarbha to transmit the external six sensory realms to these form-bodies.

The Tathāgatagarbha utilizes its four great seeds in varying proportions and sequences to manifest infinite and boundless material form-dharmas. However, this process is beyond our comprehension due to our limited merit, wisdom and the obstacles from our ignorance. As a result, our understanding remains restricted. To expand the mind-field and cultivate wisdom to the level of a Buddha, we must extinguish ignorance and karmic propensities, and remove the obstacles within our mind-grounds.

21.

Are the seven great seeds and consciousness seeds in each Tathāgatagarbha the same? How many types of consciousness seeds are there, and are karmic seeds composed of the seven great seeds?

Every sentient being's Tathāgatagarbha contains the same seven great seeds, which also applies to consciousness seeds. The differences between beings are reflected in their karmic seeds and mental factors, as well as their constructions of the five skandhas

and consciousness-minds. There are seven types of consciousness seeds corresponding to the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and the sixth and seventh consciousnesses. Karmic seeds, however, arise from the mental actions performed by body, speech and mind. These seeds are formless and serve as records of actions generated by the five skandhas through body, speech and mind, including the constructions of mental factors. Karmic seeds are not composed of the seven great seeds.

22.

The operation of the five skandhas and the eighteen realms of phenomena reflects the functionings and characteristics of the seven great seeds. These seeds operate within the six sense faculties and six sensory realms. The actions of the five great seeds—earth, water, fire, wind and space—on the form-body, along with the influence of consciousness seeds on the consciousness-minds, are all reflected on the functioning of the five skandhas. The consciousness seeds, the four great seeds, the great space seed, and the great perceiving seed work together to generate the five skandhas. Once the Tathāgatagarbha delivers these seeds, it immediately establishes their functionings and characteristics, which are considered part of the Tathāgatagarbha's own functionings and characteristics, though they are not exactly the same. This relationship is neither one nor different. The Tathāgatagarbha's inherent seeds metamorphose all dharmas; thus, all seeds and dharmas belong to it. It is capable of storing and delivering them, making all dharmas its own.

However, the Tathāgatagarbha is devoid of the mental formations exhibited in the seven consciousnesses. It is entirely free from self and does not cling to any dharma; its mind-ground is inherently pure. Conversely, the mano-āyatana clings to all dharmas metamorphosed by the Tathāgatagarbha, treating everything as belonging to it. It also clings to the functions and characteristics of the six consciousnesses. While it clings to the dharmas manifested by the Tathāgatagarbha, it remains ignorant of the Tathāgatagarbha and its metamorphosing function. The Tathāgatagarbha creates

these according to karmic seeds and conditions, but the mano-āyatana, trapped in the three realms of existence by its avaricious attachment and obstructed from liberation, considers all five skandhas and eighteen realms of phenomena as its own and craves them. It is the mano-āyatana that clings tightly to all dharmas and cannot relinquish its bondage, not the six consciousnesses.

23.

Everything—people, affairs, objects and principles—is produced by the Tathāgatagarbha based on various conditions; without these conditions, myriad dharmas would not exist. The Tathāgatagarbha first relies on conditions and karmic seeds, then aligns with the decisions made by the mano-āyatana's mental factor of volition to operate and manifest all dharmas. Once all dharmas go through the cycle of arising, dwelling, changing and ceasing, their seeds return to the Tathāgatagarbha, which later delivers them again to bring forth myriad dharmas. Each dharma, with its characteristics of arising, dwelling, changing and ceasing, is like a bubble—appearing and then disappearing. The five skandhas, too, are like bubbles, always appearing and disappearing. Meanwhile, the Tathāgatagarbha is like the ocean, pulling the water that forms the splashes, and the droplets of water return to it as the splashes vanish. However, the mano-āyatana, due to its craving and ignorance, continuously grasps at these splashes, never able to hold them throughout infinite kalpas.

One person is one bubble, one affair is one bubble, one principle is one bubble; even the history of the universe, mountains, rivers and the great earth are bubbles. Big, small, and infinite bubbles arise and cease within the great ocean—none of them real but all illusory. The unmoving one is the great ocean; droplets remain the same, neither increasing nor decreasing. The wind of phenomena, akin to karmic seeds and karmic conditions, as well as the mano-āyatana's volition and appropriating nature, drives the Tathāgatagarbha to bring forth these "winds of phenomena." Responding solely to karmic causes and conditions, it repeatedly exports and retrieves these seeds, yet their quantity never changes. The primordial

essence of the Tathāgatagarbha and its seeds are non-arising, non-ceasing, neither increasing nor decreasing. Though all phases are in constant flux, the Tathāgatagarbha remains unmoving; what moves are merely illusory forms manifested by it, just like bubbles. Mano-āyatana generates afflictions by clinging to these appearances, but in the end, it grasps nothing, accumulating only innumerable karmic seeds stored in the Tathāgatagarbha. These seeds, too, are not real—what comes from nothing and becomes something eventually returns to nothing. Sentient beings, unaware of the illusory nature of these experiences, grasp them as real, which impedes their liberation and traps them in the cycle of samsara within the three realms of existence.

All these people, affairs, objects and principles, along with all perceptions, sensations, consciousness-minds, and various behavioral constructions—are like bubbles: impermanent, empty, illusory, suffering-enduring, and unreal, neither self nor belonging to self. Myriad dharmas are illusory creations of the Tathāgatagarbha and cannot exist outside of it. Just as gold jewelry, regardless of shape and function, is fundamentally gold, sentient beings cling to their forms and generate various emotions around them, failing to recognize their essence as simply gold. Similarly, all dharmas and the five skandhas share the same substance—Tathāgatagarbha and its seven great seeds. The substance of the form-body is composed of the Tathāgatagarbha and its five great seeds.

24.

The Tathāgatagarbha delivers the four great seeds to generate specific material form-dharmas, much like using gold to craft a golden bowl. A golden bowl may serve its purpose for holding food, but when a different utensil is needed, the bowl becomes unnecessary and can be reshaped into a new form. Similarly, this is how the Tathāgatagarbha functions: when one material form-dharma ceases, the four great seeds return to it; when a new form is required, the Tathāgatagarbha once again sends forth the seeds to create another form-dharma. Thus, all dharmas arise from the

Tathāgatagarbha, maintaining a relationship that is neither wholly unified nor entirely distinct, with each possessing its own function, nature, appearance and essence. However, these elements are ultimately determined by the Tathāgatagarbha. Consequently, all dharmas are expressions of the Tathāgatagarbha—they are neither identical to it nor completely separate.

The Tathāgatagarbha is non-arising and non-ceasing, as are its seven great seeds. Although all dharmas seem to arise and cease, they are fundamentally non-arising and non-ceasing—they cease and re-arise; what has ceased might as well arise again. As long as the Tathāgatagarbha exists, its seven great seeds remain, ensuring that all dharmas never truly cease—they might as well continue to exist.

Regarding the golden bowl, perspectives vary. Some recognize the nature of the gold itself and, when needed, fashion it into jewelry or a brick. Most, however, focus on the appearance of the golden bowl, using it solely for food or water. Others might use it for decoration. Similarly, the five skandhas-body is like a golden house: myriad Buddhas use it to benefit infinite sentient beings, while ordinary beings use it to engage in unwholesome deeds.

25.

Karma consists of the mental formations constructed by mano-āyatana and the six consciousnesses, whether through their own actions or in conjunction with the mental formations of body, speech and mind. These formations are stored as karmic seeds in the Tathāgatagarbha. Both wholesome and unwholesome karmic actions result in the formation of pure and defiled karmic seeds. When one engages in karmic actions, the body and consciousness-minds work together, reflecting the functioning and characteristics of the seven great seeds. Thus, the construction of karmic actions is inseparable from the force of the Tathāgatagarbha, with all eight consciousnesses involved in committing these actions.

Upon realizing one's Tathāgatagarbha, one understands that unwholesome karmic actions are illusory and unreal. This realization reveals the fundamental nature of karmic actions as

nonexistent, leading to the dissipation or reduction of karmic fruits —transforming severe consequences into lighter retribution.

Once a karmic act is committed, the consciousness seeds return to the Tathāgatagarbha, remaining pure and undefiled. However, the karmic action is imprinted and recorded; even after retribution, while the karmic seeds may disappear, the record remains. This is akin to a person who commits a crime and serves their sentence: even after release, the prison maintains a record for future reference.

The consciousness seeds that form consciousness-minds remain pure and free from mental formations, regardless of how the consciousness-minds construct karmic actions. The construction of the consciousness-minds involves mental factors that arise, transform and change. Mental factors are not formed by the consciousness seeds nor are they their functions; thus, the consciousness seeds themselves remain pure. What changes are the mental factors; their operations shape karma, which then forms the karmic seeds that are stored in the Tathāgatagarbha. As mental factors evolve, defiled karma diminishes, and pure karma arises, leading to the replacement of karmic seeds. Our practice aims to dispel ignorance, and once ignorance is removed, mental factors shift, resulting in changes in mental formations as well.

26.

The quantity of the seven great seeds is fixed and unchanging, although we cannot ascertain how many there are. The Tathāgatagarbha utilizes these innumerable seeds to create all dharmas; when these dharmas cease, the seeds return to the Tathāgatagarbha and are then reborn into other dharmas. The seeds are in a constant cycle of arising and ceasing, kṣaṇa by kṣaṇa, just as all dharmas are, which defines their impermanent nature.

27.

What are the relationship between the perceiving aspect of the seventh consciousness and the great perceiving seed, and the

relationship between the great perceiving seed and the great consciousness seed?

The Tathāgatagarbha utilizes six of the seven great seeds—earth, water, fire, wind, space and consciousness—to form a sentient being's five skandhas and eighteen realms of phenomena. Among the seven great seeds, the great perceiving is the inherent nature of the Tathāgatagarbha's perceiving aspect, known as nature-perceiving [and is referred to as Buddha-nature]. This nature-perceiving is unaffected by bright or dark states; it manifests based on conditions and remains dormant when such conditions are absent, such as in the nirvanic state of full extinction of existence where conditions for the five skandhas and eighteen realms are lacking.

In contrast, the great consciousness seed directly forms the seven consciousnesses-minds, enabling cognition and differentiation, which lead to the formations of body, speech and mind. The cognitive and differentiating functions of the seven consciousnesses-minds represent the perceiving aspect of the seven consciousnesses, distinct from the Tathāgatagarbha's nature-perceiving. This perceiving aspect is characterized by arising, ceasing, and being illusory; its existence relies on the consciousness seeds. In contrast, the Tathāgatagarbha's nature-perceiving never ceases its operation—except in the nirvanic state, where the conditions for the six sense faculties and sensory realms are absent. Furthermore, the Tathāgatagarbha's own nature of consciousness and its nature-perceiving maintain an equal relationship, as both are non-arising and non-ceasing.

28.

The relationship between karmic seeds and the seven great seeds.

Before discussing whether karmic seeds and the seven great seeds are independent, let's first examine how karmic seeds are formed. Karmic seeds arise when the seven consciousness-minds engage in mental formations through body, speech and mind using the form-body. Among these consciousnesses, mano-āyatana plays a central role by directing, instigating and commanding the six

consciousnesses to utilize the form-body for various actions through body, speech and mind. These actions are then stored as karmic seeds in the Tathāgatagarbha. When the conditions and causes are ripe, these seeds sprout and manifest as karmic fruits, fulfilling the law of causes and conditions.

The seven consciousness-minds are formed by their respective consciousness seeds; the form-body is shaped by the great seeds of earth, water, fire, wind and space; and the great perceiving seed reflects the functionings and characteristics of the Tathāgatagarbha. The seven great seeds work collectively to construct karmic actions, leading to the formation of karmic seeds. This entire process expresses the functionings and characteristics of the Tathāgatagarbha.

The relationship between karmic seeds and the seven great seeds is deeply interconnected, yet karmic seeds operate independently of the seven great seeds. For instance, when the five great seeds of earth, water, fire, wind and space return to Tathāgatagarbha, they do not carry karmic actions. Similarly, when the great perceiving and great consciousness seeds return to Tathāgatagarbha, they do not bring back the karmic seeds or actions constructed by the five skandhas-body and seven consciousnesses.

The great consciousness seed, inherently pure like the other great seeds, remains untainted. Karmic actions—whether wholesome, unwholesome or neutral—arise from the interaction of mental factors and the seven consciousnesses. It is through this interplay that consciousness-minds come to possess the three types of karmic actions, which then form karmic seeds. However, these karmic seeds do not follow the great consciousness seeds back to Tathāgatagarbha, affirming the seed's purity and perpetual capacity for delivery.

Since mental factors accompany the consciousness-minds in their operations, they directly influence the three types of karmic actions. Mental factors bear the qualities of wholesome, unwholesome or neutral, yet the consciousness-minds formed by the great consciousness seeds do not. This shows that karmic seeds are closely linked to mental factors: when mental factors change, so do karmic seeds; when mental factors are purified, karmic seeds

likewise become pure. Thus, the seven great seeds and karmic seeds function as two distinct mechanisms—though interconnected, they should not be conflated.

Do the seven great seeds carry karmic information when delivered by the Tathāgatagarbha? No, because they are inherently pure, whether in sentient beings or Buddhas. The difference lies in the mental factors, which determine whether karmic seeds and consciousness-minds are defiled or pure. Therefore, our practice should focus on transforming mental factors rather than futilely attempting to alter the unchangeable consciousness seeds or the seven great seeds. By purifying our mental factors and transforming karmic seeds from defiled to pure, we align our Tathāgatagarbha with the pure essence of the Buddhas.

29.

Karmic seeds are not generated by the four great seeds; they are instead a type of information—a formless records akin to files in a computer: without physical form, yet retrievable when needed. Even if karmic seeds appear to disappear, those with transcendental power can still access and examine their records. These seeds represent unfathomable profound teachings, and what we currently comprehend is mostly speculation and imagination, as we are unable to directly perceive them through our contemplation. Only upon entering the first ground of the Bodhisattva Path, when we gain consciousness-only wisdom, can we begin to correspond with them slowly and gradually discern and understand their content.

Karma can be either pure or defiled, with only Arhats in the nirvanic state not constructing karma. Buddhas, too, construct karma, though only pure karma. In the nirvanic state, Arhats cease to exist as individual entities and thus no longer create karma. The mano-āyatana is responsible for the construction of karma; without its operation, no karma could be created. Ultimately, however, it is the Tathāgatagarbha that is the source of all karmic actions.

30.

Although the Tathāgatagarbha contains the seeds for myriad dharmas, these seeds only manifest when the necessary conditions are met; otherwise, they remain dormant within the Tathāgatagarbha. Myriad dharmas arise through dependent origination, with the Tathāgatagarbha serving as the fundamental cause, while karmic seeds, arising from actions in previous lives, act as the karmic cause. Conditions are essential prerequisites for the manifestation of karmic seeds—without the right conditions, the seeds cannot sprout. Although all dharmas in the three realms are mind-only, but the myriad dharmas too, are consciousness-only. Here, "mind" refers to the Tathāgatagarbha, while "consciousness" refers to the three-transforming consciousnesses, i.e., the eight consciousnesses. As the Buddha states in the *Saṃyukta-āgama Sutra*, "When there are causes and conditions, the world arises; when there are causes and conditions, the world ceases." This highlights that when causes and conditions are perfectly aligned, the corresponding dharmas emerge.

31.

Should the fetal physical body be directly produced by the Tathāgatagarbha through the delivery of the four great seeds?

The Tathāgatagarbha manifests the five skandhas-body or transforms a physical body solely based on karmic conditions. If the creation of a physical body were determined only by the four great seeds, it would not require parental conditions or any other external factors. In such a case, all sentient beings would possess identical bodies, and the world and material form-dharmas would be uniform. The Tathāgatagarbha would not need the mano-āyatana and the six consciousnesses to manifest the three realms of existence in the physical universe, or the five skandhas-body. This would suggest that the Tathāgatagarbha, as the sole governing consciousness, creates a homogeneous world, attributing it to a nature of self rather than no-self. However, in reality, once the world is created, the Tathāgatagarbha depends on various karmic

conditions to shape and alter an individual's five skandhas and their eighteen realms of phenomena. These conditions include external material form-dharmas, the individual's living environment, parental factors, and more.

32.

What does it mean to follow the karma and discover?

In the *Shurangama Sutra*, the Buddha explains that sentient beings experience different aspects of dharmas based on their karmic forces and karmic conditions. For instance, while some can extract gold from a gold mine, others cannot. Similarly, those in need of water may either die of dehydration or drown, depending on their karma. Some beings are able to perceive and enter the hell realms, while others remain oblivious to them. This also applies to realms like Heaven and the Pure Land. Each sentient being's environment and experiences are shaped by their individual karma, which governs what they encounter. Without karma, none of these experiences manifest.

33.

Do the seven great seeds truly exist?

Only an essence that truly exists can bring forth dharmas. The Tathāgatagarbha, being the real essence, possesses the capacity to create all dharmas; however, it requires the seven great seeds for this creation. Thus, the seven great seeds must reside within the Tathāgatagarbha as genuinely present entities, enabling it to utilize them in bringing forth all dharmas. Without a real essence and true existence, no dharma can be created; fictitious entities lack the substance to construct anything. This confirms that the Tathāgatagarbha has a real essence, which is formless, and that the seven great seeds, too, are real dharmas, formless within the Tathāgatagarbha.

To determine if a dharma is absolutely real, we must examine its constant nature: whether it is unborn and never undergoes

transmutation. Constancy means that even in the nirvanic state of the complete extinction of existence, the Tathāgatagarbha and its seven great seeds persist, and even in the nirvanic state, they do not undergo birth. No dharma gives rise to the Tathāgatagarbha and its seven great seeds; rather, it is the other way around.